

Galaxy[®]

SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 1959

PROSPECTOR'S
SPECIAL

by
**ROBERT
SHECKLEY**

•
DEAD OR
ALIVE?

by
WILLY LEY

•
THE
UNDETECTED

by
**GEORGE
O. SMITH**

•
BLACKWORD

by
A. J. OFFUTT

And Other Stories



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Cover by ESMH offering SEASON'S GREETINGS TO OUR READERS

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OF ALL THINGS

WITH no place to put mail, the wonderful stuff accumulates — but if it turns out that you like this editorial handling of it AND keep replenishing the supply, there will be a place for it, and we won't have the guiltily selfish feeling of not being able to share. Just take a look at this hoard.

Name Withheld, N.Y., sent us an 1872 list of rules for teachers:

A. Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys, and trim wicks.

B. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's session.

C. Make your pens carefully. You may whittle nibs to the individual tastes of the pupils.

D. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.

E. After ten hours in school, the teachers should spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.

F. Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.

G. Every teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not become a burden on society.

H. Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequents pool or public halls, or gets shaved in a barber shop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity, and honesty.

I. The teacher who performs his labors faithfully and without fault for five years will be given an increase of 25¢ per week in his pay, providing the Board of Education approves.

Winifred Northrun
Principal

Name Withheld adds: "I'd hate having to share the Earth with Miss Northrun. I can't say I'd like having ever-young flappers or bobby-soxers around any better. Let's not jump into this immortality thing, shall we?"

All right, but let's not put it off till every last little bug is worked out.

As a courtesy to Fritz Lang, who made "Metropolis," "The Girl in the Moon" and other early science fiction films, we run this free ad: "GALAXY from 1st issue to end of 1957; *Astounding* from 1933 to end of 1957; *Weird Tales* from 1935 to 1957; all complete. Best offer. Write c/o Willy Ley, this magazine." Lang has gone back to

Germany, expects to spend the rest of his life there, can get the German edition of GALAXY. Free-ad courtesy is extended only to makers of early s-f films, and to the following:

"GALAXY will be available on tape for blind science fiction enthusiasts, if enough apply to make the project possible. For information, write* Tape-Respondents, International; Blind Services Committee; Roy H. Trumbull, Assistant Director, P.O. Box 247, Corte Madera, Calif.

Quite some time back this department assembled evidence that There Are Aliens Among Us. Here is further evidence sent in by readers:

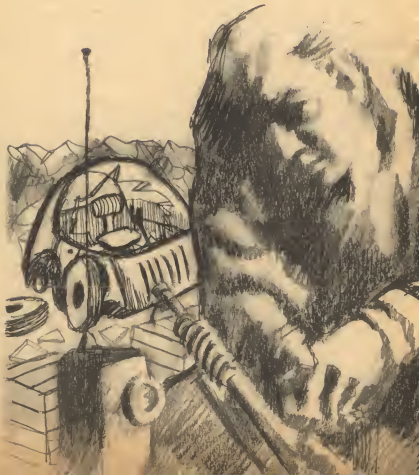
James J. Davidson, Haddonfield, N. J.: "In the March 1958 issue of *Scientific American* appeared an advertisement by American Optical Co., Instrumentation Division, concerning their microscopes, that read in part: 'You can adapt the Microstar to your exact needs with various combinations of interchangeable bodies, stages, bases and optics . . . Choice of 3 interchangeable full 360° rotatable bodies, monocular, binocular, and trinocular; inclined for comfort . . .' Inclined *how* for *whose* comfort? Not mine — though I'd rather meet an inclined trinocular being than one standing up."

Keith Newburgh, Christchurch, N. Z., offers this Wellington clip-

ping: "The problem of where the flies go in winter is nothing like the problem the National Roads Board has with its traffic tallies on the motorway around the head of Auckland Harbour. Figures presented to the board today showed the count at 8000 vehicles at one point on the motorway. At another check point, 3 miles or so further on, the number of vehicles had dropped to 5000. Transport Department men said there were no roads leading off the motorway between the two points and they could not explain where the other 3000 vehicles went to." Mr. Newburgh believes this shows that aliens "are already confiscating motor vehicles on an enormous scale in order to facilitate their taking over this planet."

Jacob Shekel, Kiryat Motzkin, Israel, provides a quote from William Feller's *An Introduction to Probability Theory and its Applications*: "The essential novelty is that a mother can have zero, one or more daughters," and ask that we note "the quotation hints not only at biological differences, but a different logic system as well. Using regular terran logic, I just cannot imagine what the converse (or inverse, or obverse, or any other verse) of that statement would be; so I cannot guess what the writer of that sentence would consider regular and non-novel," a comment
(Continued on page 194)

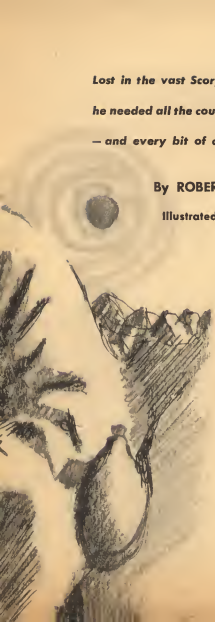
PROSPECTOR'S
SPECIAL



*Lost in the vast Scorpion Desert of Venus,
he needed all the courage a man could own
— and every bit of credit he could raise!*

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Illustrated by DILLON



THE sandcar moved smoothly over the rolling dunes, its six fat wheels rising and falling like the ponderous rumps of tandem elephants. The hidden sun beat down from a dead-white sky, pouring heat into the canvas top, reflecting heat back from the parched sand.

"Stay awake," Morrison told himself, pulling the sandcar back to its compass course.

It was his twenty-first day on Venus's Scorpion Desert, his twenty-first day of fighting sleep while the sandcar rocked across the dunes, forging over humpbacked little waves. Night travel would have been easier, but there were too many steep ravines to avoid,

too many house-sized boulders to dodge. Now he knew why men went into the desert in teams; one man drove while the other kept shaking him awake.

"But it's better alone," Morrison reminded himself. "Half the supplies and no accidental murders."

His head was beginning to droop; he snapped himself erect. In front of him, the landscape shimmered and danced through the polaroid windshield. The sandcar lurched and rocked with treacherous gentleness. Morrison rubbed his eyes and turned on the radio.

He was a big, sunburned, rangy young man with close-cropped black hair and gray eyes. He had come to Venus with a grubstake of twenty thousand dollars, to find his fortune in the Scorpion Desert as others had done before him. He had outfitted in Presto, the last town on the edge of the wilderness, and spent all but ten dollars on the sandcar and equipment.

In Presto, ten dollars just covered the cost of a drink in the town's only saloon. So Morrison ordered rye and water, drank with the miners and prospectors, and laughed at the oldtimers' yarns about the sandwolf packs and the squadrons of voracious birds that inhabited the interior desert. He knew all about sunblindness, heat-stroke and telephone breakdown. He was sure none of it would happen to him.

But now, after twenty-one days and eighteen hundred miles, he had learned respect for this waterless waste of sand and stone three times the area of the Sahara. You really *could* die here!

But you could also get rich, and that was what Morrison planned to do.

HIS radio hummed. At full volume, he could hear the faintest murmur of dance music from Venusborg. Then it faded and only the hum was left.

He turned off the radio and gripped the steering wheel tightly in both hands. He unclenched one hand and looked at his watch. Nine-fifteen in the morning. At ten-thirty he would stop and take a nap. A man had to have rest in this heat. But only a half-hour nap. Treasure lay somewhere ahead of him, and he wanted to find it before his supplies got much lower.

The precious outcroppings of goldenstone *had* to be up ahead! He'd been following traces for two days now. Maybe he would hit a real bonanza, as Kirk did in '89, or Edmonson and Arsler in '93. If so, he would do just what they did. He'd order up a Prospector's Special, and to hell with the cost.

The sandcar rolled along at an even thirty miles an hour, and Morrison tried to concentrate on the heat-blasted yellow-brown landscape. That sandstone patch over

there was just the tawny color of Janie's hair.

After he struck it rich, he and Janie would get married, and he'd go back to Earth and buy an ocean farm. No more prospecting. Just one rich strike so he could buy his spread on the deep blue Atlantic. Maybe some people thought fish-herding was tame; it was good enough for him.

He could see it now, the mackerel herds drifting along and browsing at the plankton pens, himself and his trusty dolphin keeping an eye out for the silvery flash of a predatory barracuda or a steel-gray shark coming along behind the branching coral. . . .

Morrison felt the sandcar lurch. He woke up, grabbed the steering wheel and turned it hard. During his moments of sleep, the vehicle had crept over the dune's crumbling edge. Sand and pebbles spun under the fat tires as the sandcar fought for traction. The car tilted perilously. The tires shrieked against the sand, gripped, and started to pull the vehicle back up the slope.

Then the whole face of the dune collapsed.

Morrison held onto the steering wheel as the sandcar flipped over on its side and rolled down the slope. Sand filled his mouth and eyes. He spat and held on while the car rolled over again and dropped into emptiness.

For seconds, he was in the air. The sandcar hit bottom squarely on its wheels. Morrison heard a double boom as the two rear tires blew out. Then his head hit the windshield.

WHEN he recovered consciousness, the first thing he did was look at his watch. It read 10:35.

"Time for that nap," Morrison said to himself. "But I guess I'll survey the situation first."

He found that he was at the bottom of a shallow fault strewn with knife-edged pebbles. Two tires had blown on impact, his windshield was gone, and one of the doors was sprung. His equipment was strewn around, but appeared to be intact.

"Could have been worse," Morrison said.

He bent down to examine the tires more carefully.

"It is worse," he said.

The two blown tires were shredded beyond repair. There wasn't enough rubber left in them to make a child's balloon. He had used up his spares ten days back crossing Devil's Grill. Used them and discarded them. He couldn't go on without tires.

Morrison unpacked his telephone. He wiped dust from its black plastic face, then dialed Al's Garage in Presto. After a moment, the small video screen lighted up. He could see a man's long, mournful, grease-stained face.

"Al's Garage. Eddie speaking."

"Hi, Eddie. This is Tom Morrison. I bought that GM sandcar from you about a month ago. Remember?"

"Sure I remember you," Eddie said. "You're the guy doing a single into the Southwest Track. How's the bus holding out?"

"Fine. Great little car. Reason I called—"

"Hey," Eddie said, "what happened to your face?"

Morrison put his hand to his forehead and felt blood. "Nothing much," he said. "I went over a dune and blew out two tires."

He turned the telephone so that Eddie could see the tires.

"Unrepairable," said Eddie.

"I thought so. And I used up all my spares crossing Devil's Grill. Look, Eddie, I'd like you to 'port me a couple of tires. Retreads are fine. I can't move the sandcar without them."

"Sure," Eddie said, "except I haven't any retreads. I'll have to 'port you new ones at five hundred apiece. Plus four hundred dollars 'porting charges. Fourteen hundred dollars, Mr. Morrison."

"All right."

"Yes, sir. Now if you'll show me the cash, or a money order which you can send back with the receipt, I'll get moving on it."

"At the moment," Morrison said, "I haven't got a cent on me."

"Bank account?"

"Stripped clean."

"Bonds? Property? Anything you can convert into cash?"

"Nothing except this sandcar, which you sold me for eight thousand dollars. When I come back, I'll settle my bill with the sandcar."

"If you get back. Sorry, Mr. Morrison. No can do."

"What do you mean?" Morrison asked. "You know I'll pay for the tires."

"And you know the rules on Venus," Eddie said, his mournful face set in obstinate lines. "No credit! Cash and carry!"

"I can't run the sandcar without tires," Morrison said. "Are you going to strand me out here?"

"Who in hell is stranding you?" Eddie asked. "This sort of thing happens to prospectors every day. You know what you have to do now, Mr. Morrison. Call Public Utility and declare yourself a bankrupt. Sign over what's left of the sandcar, equipment, and anything you've found on the way. They'll get you out."

"I'm not turning back," Morrison said. "Look!" He held the telephone close to the ground. "You see the traces, Eddie? See those red and purple flecks? There's precious stuff near here!"

"Every prospector sees traces," Eddie said. "Damned desert is full of traces."

"These are rich," Morrison said.

"These are leading straight to big stuff, a bonanza lode. Eddie, I know it's a lot to ask, but if you could stake me to a couple of tires—"

"I can't do it," Eddie said. "I just work here. I can't 'port you any tires, not unless you show me money first. Otherwise I get fired and probably jailed. You know the law."

"Cash and carry," Morrison said bleakly.

"Right. Be smart and turn back now. Maybe you can try again some other time."

"I spent twelve years getting this stake together," Morrison said. "I'm not going back."

He turned off the telephone and tried to think. Was there anyone else on Venus he could call? Only Max Krandall, his jewel broker. But Max couldn't raise fourteen hundred dollars in that crummy two-by-four office near Venusborg's jewel market. Max could barely scrape up his own rent, much less take care of stranded prospectors.

"I can't ask Max for help," Morrison decided. "Not until I've found goldenstone. The real stuff, not just traces. So that leaves it up to me."

He opened the back of the sand-car and began to unload, piling his equipment on the sand. He would have to choose carefully; anything he took would have to be carried on his back.

The telephone had to go with

him, and his lightweight testing kit. Food concentrates, revolver, compass. And nothing else but water, all the water he could carry. The rest of the stuff would have to stay behind.

By nightfall, Morrison was ready. He looked regretfully at the twenty cans of water he was leaving. In the desert, water was a man's most precious possession, second only to his telephone. But it couldn't be helped. After drinking his fill, he hoisted his pack and set a southwest course into the desert.

For three days he trekked to the southwest; then on the fourth day he veered to due south, following an increasingly rich trace. The sun, eternally hidden, beat down on him, and the dead-white sky was like a roof of heated iron over his head. Morrison followed the traces, and something followed him.

On the sixth day, he sensed movement just out of the range of his vision. On the seventh day, he saw what was trailing him.

VENUS'S own brand of wolf, small, lean, with a yellow coat and long, grinning jaws, it was one of the few mammals that made its home in the Scorpion Desert. As Morrison watched, two more sand-wolves appeared beside it.

He loosened the revolver in its holster. The wolves made no attempt to come closer. They had plenty of time.

Morrison kept on going, wishing he had brought a rifle with him. But that would have meant eight pounds more, which meant eight pounds less water.

As he was pitching camp at dusk the eighth day, he heard a crackling sound. He whirled around and located its source, about ten feet to his left and above his head. A little vortex had appeared, a tiny mouth in the air like a whirlpool in the sea. It spun, making the characteristic crackling sounds of 'porting.

"Now who could be 'porting anything to me?" Morrison asked, waiting while the whirlpool slowly widened.

Solidoporting from a base projector to a field target was a standard means of moving goods across the vast distances of Venus. Any inanimate object could be 'ported; animate beings couldn't because the process involved certain minor but distressing molecular changes in protoplasm. A few people had found this out the hard way when 'porting was first introduced.

Morrison waited. The aerial whirlpool became a mouth three feet in diameter. From the mouth stepped a chrome-plated robot carrying a large sack.

"Oh, it's you," Morrison said.

"Yes, sir," the robot said, now completely clear of the field. "Williams 4 at your service with the Venus Mail."

It was a robot of medium height, thin-shanked and flat-footed, humanoid in appearance, amiable in disposition. For twenty-three years it had been Venus's entire postal service—sorter, deliverer, and dead storage. It had been built to last, and for twenty-three years the mails had always come through.

"Here we are, Mr. Morrison," Williams 4 said. "Only twice-a-month mail call in the desert, I'm sorry to say, but it comes promptly and that's a blessing. This is for you. And this. I think there's one more. Sandcar broke down, eh?"

"It sure did," Morrison said, taking his letters.

Williams 4 went on rummaging through its bag. Although it was a superbly efficient postman, the old robot was known as the worst gossip on three planets.

"There's one more in here somewhere," Williams 4 said. "Too bad about the sandcar. They just don't build 'em like they did in my youth. Take my advice, young man. Turn back if you still have the chance."

Morrison shook his head.

"Foolish, downright foolish," the old robot said. "Pity you don't have my perspective. Too many's the time I've come across you boys lying in the sand in the dried-out sack of your skin, or with your bones gnawed to splinters by the sand-wolves and the filthy black kites. Twenty-three years I've been delivering mail to fine-looking young

men like you, and each one thinking he's unique and different."

THE robot's eyecells became distant with memory. "But they *aren't* different," Williams 4 said. "They're as alike as robots off the assembly line — especially after the wolves get through with them. And then I have to send their letters and personal effects back to their loved ones on Earth."

"I know," Morrison said. "But some get through, don't they?"

"Sure they do," the robot said. "I've seen men make one, two, three fortunes. And then die on the sands trying to make a fourth."

"Not me," Morrison said. "I just want one. Then I'm going to buy me an undersea farm on Earth."

The robot shuddered. "I have a dread of salt water. But to each his own. Good luck, young man."

The robot looked Morrison over carefully — probably to see what he had in the way of personal effects — then climbed back into the aerial whirlpool. In a moment, it was gone. In another moment, the whirlpool had vanished.

Morrison sat down to read his mail. The first letter was from his jewel broker, Max Krandall. It told about the depression that had hit Venusborg, and hinted that Krandall might have to go into bankruptcy if some of his prospectors didn't strike something good.

The second letter was a state-

ment from the Venus Telephone Company. Morrison owed two hundred and ten dollars and eight cents for two months' telephone service. Unless he remitted this sum at once, his telephone was liable to be turned off.

The last letter, all the way from Earth, was from Janie. It was filled with news about his cousins, aunts and uncles. She told him about the Atlantic farm sites she had looked over, and the wonderful little place she had found near Martinique in the Caribbean. She begged him to give up prospecting if it looked dangerous; they could find another way of financing the farm. She sent all her love and wished him a happy birthday in advance.

"Birthday?" Morrison asked himself. "Let's see, today is July twenty-third. No, it's the twenty-fourth, and my birthday's August first. Thanks for remembering, Janie."

That night he dreamed of Earth and the blue expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. But toward dawn, when the heat of Venus became insistent, he found he was dreaming of mile upon mile of goldenstone, of grinning sandwolves, and of the Prospector's Special.

ROCK gave way to sand as Morrison plowed his way across the bottom of a long-vanished lake. Then it was rock again, twisted and tortured into a thousand gaunt

shapes. Reds, yellows and browns swam in front of his eyes. In all that desert, there wasn't one patch of green.

He continued his trek into the tumbled stone mazes of the interior desert, and the wolves trekked with him, keeping pace far out on either flank.

Morrison ignored them. He had enough on his mind just to negotiate the sheer cliffs and the fields of broken stone that blocked his way to the south.

By the eleventh day after leaving the sandcar, the traces were almost rich enough for panning. The sandwolves were tracking him still, and his water was almost gone. Another day's march would finish him.

Morrison thought for a moment, then unstrapped his telephone and dialed Public Utility in Venusborg.

The video screen showed a stern, severely dressed woman with iron-gray hair. "Public Utility," she said. "May we be of service?"

"Hi," Morrison said cheerfully. "How's the weather in Venusborg?"

"Hot," the woman said. "How's it out there?"

"I hadn't even noticed," Morrison said, grinning. "Too busy counting my fortune."

"You've found goldenstone?" the woman asked, her expression becoming less severe.

"Sure have," Morrison said. "But don't pass the word around yet. I'm

still staking my claim. I think I can use a refill on these."

Smiling easily, he held up his canteens. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, if you showed enough confidence, Public Utility would fill you up without checking your account. True, it was embezzling, but this was no time for niceties.

"I suppose your account is in order?" asked the woman.

"Of course," Morrison said, feeling his smile grow stiff. "The name's Tom Morrison. You can just check—"

"Oh, I don't do that personally," the woman said. "Hold that canteen steady. Here we go."

GRIPPING the canteen in both hands, Morrison watched as the water, 'ported four thousand miles from Venusborg, appeared as a slender crystal stream above the mouth of his canteen. The stream entered the canteen, making a wonderful gurgling sound. Watching it, Morrison found his dry mouth actually was beginning to salivate.

Then the water stopped.

"What's the matter?" Morrison asked.

His video screen went blank. Then it cleared, and Morrison found himself staring into a man's narrow face. The man was seated in front of a large desk. The sign in front of him read *Milton P. Reade, Vice President, Accounts.*



"MR. Morrison," Reade said, "your account is overdrawn. You have been obtaining water under false pretenses. That is a criminal offense."

"I'm going to pay for the water," Morrison said.

"When?"

"As soon as I get back to Venusborg."

"With what," asked Mr. Reade, "do you propose to pay?"

"With goldenstone," Morrison said. "Look around here, Mr. Reade. The traces are rich! Richer than they were for the Kirk claim! I'll be hitting the outcroppings in another day—"

"That's what every prospector thinks," Mr. Reade said. "Every prospector on Venus is only a day from goldenstone. And they all expect credit from Public Utility."

"But in this case—"

"Public Utility," Mr. Reade continued inexorably, "is not a philanthropic organization. Its charter specifically forbids the extension of credit. Venus is a frontier, Mr. Morrison, a *farflung* frontier. Every manufactured article on Venus must be imported from Earth at outrageous cost. We do have our own water, but locating it, purifying it, then 'porting it is an expensive process. This company, like every other company on Venus, necessarily operates on a very narrow margin of profit, which is invariably plowed back into further

expansion. That is why there can be no credit on Venus."

"I know all that," Morrison said. "But I'm telling you, I only need a day or two more—"

"Absolutely impossible. By the rules, we shouldn't even help you out now. The time to report bankruptcy was a week ago, when your sandcar broke down. Your garage man reported, as required by law. But you didn't. We would be within our rights to leave you stranded. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, of course," Morrison said wearily.

"However, the company has decided to stretch a point in your favor. If you turn back immediately, we will keep you supplied with water for the return trip."

"I'm not turning back yet. I'm almost on the real stuff."

"You must turn back! Be reasonable, Morrison! Where would we be if we let every prospector wander over the desert while we supplied his water? There'd be ten thousand men out there, and we'd be out of business inside of a year. I'm stretching the rules now. Turn back."

"No," said Morrison.

"You'd better think about it. If you don't turn back now, Public Utility takes no further responsibility for your water supply."

Morrison nodded. If he went on, he would stand a good chance of

dying in the desert. But if he turned back, what then? He would be in Venusborg, penniless and in debt, looking for work in an overcrowded city. He'd sleep in a community shed and eat at a soup kitchen with the other prospectors who had turned back. And how would he be able to raise the fare back to Earth? When would he ever see Janie again?

"I guess I'll keep on going," Morrison said.

"Then Public Utility takes no further responsibility for you," Reade repeated, and hung up.

Morrison packed up his telephone, took a sip from his meager water supply, and went on.

THE sandwolves loped along at each side, moving in closer. Overhead, a delta-winged kite found him. It balanced on the updrafts for a day and a night, waiting for the wolves to finish him. Then a flock of small flying scorpions sighted the waiting kite. They drove the big creature upstairs into the cloud bank. For a day the flying reptiles waited. Then they in turn were driven off by a squadron of black kites.

The traces were very rich now, on the fifteenth day since he had left the sandcar. By rights, he should be walking over goldenstone. He should be surrounded by goldenstone. But still he hadn't found any.

Morrison sat down and shook his last canteen. It gave off no wet sound. He uncapped it and turned it up over his mouth. Two drops trickled down his parched throat.

It was about four days since he had talked to Public Utility. He must have used up the last of his water yesterday. Or had it been the day before?

He recapped the empty canteen and looked around at the heat-blasted landscape. Abruptly he pulled the telephone out of his pack and dialed Max Krandall in Venusborg.

Krandall's round, worried face swam into focus on the screen. "Tommy," he said, "you look like hell."

"I'm all right," Morrison said. "A little dried out, that's all. Max, I'm near goldenstone."

"Are you sure?" Krandall asked.

"See for yourself," Morrison said, swinging the telephone around. "Look at the stone formations! Do you see the red and purple markings over there?"

"Traces, all right," Krandall admitted dubiously.

"There's rich stuff just beyond it," Morrison said. "There has to be! Look, Max, I know you're short on money, but I'm going to ask you a favor. Send me a pint of water. Just a pint, so I can go on for another day or two. We can both get rich for the price of a pint of water."

"I can't do it," Krandall said sadly.

"You can't?"

"That's right. Tommy, I'd send you water even if there wasn't anything around you but sandstone and granite. Do you think I'd let you die of thirst if I could help it? But I can't do a thing. Take a look."

KRANDALL rotated his telephone. Morrison saw that the chairs, table, desk, filing cabinet and safe were gone from the office. All that was left in the room was the telephone.

"I don't know why they haven't taken out the phone," Krandall said. "I owe two months on my bill."

"I do too," said Morrison.

"I'm stripped," Krandall said. "I haven't got a dime. Don't get me wrong, I'm not worried about myself. I can always eat at a soup kitchen. But I can't 'port you any water. Not you or Remstaater."

"Jim Remstaater?"

"Yeah. He was following a trace up north past Forgotten River. His sandcar broke an axle last week and he wouldn't turn back. His water ran out yesterday."

"I'd bail him out if I could," said Morrison.

"And he'd bail you out if he could," Krandall said. "But he can't and you can't and I can't. Tommy, you have only one hope."

"What's that?"

"Find goldenstone. Not just traces, find the real thing worth real money. Then phone me. If you really have goldenstone, I'll bring in Wilkes from Tri-Planet Mining and get him to advance us some money. He'll probably want fifty per cent of the claim."

"That's plain robbery!"

"No, it's just the high cost of credit on Venus," Krandall answered. "Don't worry, there'll still be plenty left over. But you have to find goldenstone first."

"OK," Morrison said. "It should be around here somewhere. Max, what's today's date?"

"July thirty-first. Why?"

"Just wondering. I'll call you when I've found something."

After hanging up, Morrison sat on a little boulder and stared dully at the sand. July thirty-first, Tomorrow was his birthday. His family would be thinking about him. Aunt Bess in Pasadena, the twins in Laos, Uncle Ted in Durango. And Janie, of course, waiting for him in Tampa.

Morrison realized that tomorrow might be his last birthday unless he found goldenstone.

He got to his feet, strapped the telephone back in his pack beside the empty canteens, and set a course to the south.

HE wasn't alone. The birds and beasts of the desert marched with him. Overhead, the silent

black kites circled endlessly. The sandwolves crept closer on his flanks, their red tongues lolling out, waiting for the carcass to fall . . .

"I'm not dead yet!" Morrison shouted at them.

He drew his revolver and fired at the nearest wolf. At twenty feet, he missed. He went down on one knee, held the revolver tightly in both hands and fired again. The wolf yelped in pain. The pack immediately went for the wounded animal, and the kites swooped down for their share.

Morrison put the revolver back in its holster and went on. He could tell he was in a badly dehydrated state. The landscape jumped and danced in front of him, and his footing was unsure. He discarded the empty canteens, threw away everything but the testing kit, telephone and revolver. Either he was coming out of the desert in style or he wasn't coming out at all.

The traces continued to run rich. But still he came upon no sign of tangible wealth.

That evening he found a shallow cave set into the base of a cliff. He crawled inside and built a barricade of rocks across the entrance. Then he drew his revolver and leaned back against the far wall.

The sandwolves were outside, sniffing and snapping their jaws. Morrison propped himself up and got ready for an all-night vigil.

He didn't sleep, but he couldn't

stay awake, either. Dreams and visions tormented him. He was back on Earth and Janie was saying to him, "It's the tuna. Something must be wrong with their diet. Every last one of them is sick."

"It's the darnedest thing," Morrison told her. "Just as soon as you domesticate a fish, it turns into a prima donna."

"Are you going to stand there philosophizing," Janie asked, "while your fish are sick?"

"Call the vet."

"I did. He's off at the Blake's place, taking care of their dairy whale."

"All right, I'll go out and take a look." He slipped on his face mask. Grinning, he said, "I don't even have time to dry off before I have to go out again."

His face and chest were wet.

MORRISON opened his eyes. His face and chest were wet — from perspiration. Staring at the partially blocked mouth of the cave, he could see green eyes, two, four, six, eight.

He fired at them, but they didn't retreat. He fired again, and his bullet ricocheted off the cave wall, stinging him with stone splinters. With his next shots, he succeeded in winging one of the wolves. The pack withdrew.

That emptied the revolver. Morrison searched through his pockets

and found five more cartridges. He carefully loaded the gun. Dawn couldn't be far away now.

And then he was dreaming again, this time of the Prospector's Special. He had heard about it in every little saloon that bordered the Scorpion. Bristly-bearded old prospectors told a hundred different stories about it, and the cynical bartenders chimed in with their versions. Kirk had it in '89, ordered up big and special just for him. Edmonson and Arsler received it in '93. That was certain. And other men had had it too, as they sat on their precious goldenstone claims. Or so people said.

But was it real? Was there such a thing as the Prospector's Special? Would he live to see that rainbow-hued wonder, tall as a church steeple, wide as a house, more precious than goldenstone itself?

Sure he would! Why, he could almost see it now . . .

Morrison shook himself awake. It was morning. Painfully, he crawled out of the cave to face the day.

He stumbled and crawled to the south, escorted closely by wolves, shaded by predatory flying things. His fingers scrabbled along rock and sand. The traces were rich, rich!

But where in all this desolation was the goldenstone?

Where? He was almost past caring. He drove his sunburned, dried-

out body, stopping only to fire a single shot when the wolves came too close.

Four bullets left.

He had to fire again when the kites, growing impatient, started diving at his head. A lucky shot tore into the flock, downing two. It gave the wolves something to fight over. Morrison crawled on blindly.

And fell over the edge of a little cliff.

It wasn't a serious fall, but the revolver was knocked from his hand. Before he could find it, the wolves were on him. Only their greed saved Morrison. While they fought over him, he rolled away and retrieved his revolver. Two shots scattered the pack. That left one bullet.

He'd have to save that one for himself, because he was too tired to go on. He sank to his knees. The traces were rich here. Fantastically rich. Somewhere nearby . . .

"Well, I'll be damned," Morrison said.

The little ravine into which he had fallen was solid goldenstone.

HE picked up a pebble. Even in its rough state he could see the deep luminous golden glow, the fiery red and purple flecks deep in the shining stone.

"Make sure," Morrison told himself. "No false alarms, no visions, no wild hopes. Make sure."

He broke off a chunk of rock with the butt of his revolver. It still looked like goldenstone. He took out his testing kit and spilled a few drops of white solution on the rock. The solution foamed green.

"Goldenstone, sure as sure," Morrison said, looking around at the glowing cliff walls. "Hey, I'm rich!"

He took out his telephone. With trembling fingers he dialed Krاندall's number.

"Max!" Morrison shouted. "I've hit it! I've hit the real stuff!"

"My name is not Max," a voice over the telephone said.

"Huh?"

"My name is Boyard," the man said.

The video screen cleared, and Morrison saw a thin, sallow-faced man with a hairline mustache.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Boyard," Morrison said. "I must have gotten the wrong number. I was calling—"

"It doesn't matter who you were calling," Mr. Boyard said. "I am District Supervisor of the Venus Telephone Company. Your bill is two months overdue."

"I can pay it now," Morrison said, grinning.

"Excellent," said Mr. Boyard. "As soon as you do, your service will be resumed."

The screen began to fade.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "I can pay as soon as I reach your office. But I must make one telephone

call. Just one call, so that I—"

"Not a chance," Mr. Boyard said decisively. "After you have paid your bill, your service will be turned on immediately."

"I've got the money right here!" Morrison said. "Right here in my hand!"

Mr. Boyard paused. "Well, it's unusual, but I suppose we could arrange for a special robot messenger if you are willing to pay the expenses."

"I am!"

"Hm. It's irregular, but I daresay we . . . Where is the money?"

"Right here," Morrison said. "You recognize it, don't you? It's goldenstone!"

"I am sick and tired of the tricks you prospectors think you can put over on us. Holding up a handful of pebbles—"

"But this is really goldenstone! Can't you see it?"

"I am a businessman," Mr. Boyard said, "not a jeweler. I wouldn't know goldenstone from goldenrod."

The video screen went blank.

FRANTICALLY, Morrison tried to reach the operator. There was nothing, not even a dial tone. His telephone was disconnected.

He put the instrument down and surveyed his situation. The narrow crevice into which he had fallen ran straight for about twenty yards, then curved to the left. No cave

was visible in the steep walls, no place where he could build a barricade.

He heard a movement behind him. Whirling around, he saw a huge old wolf in full charge. Without a moment's hesitation, Morrison drew and fired, blasting off the top of the beast's head.

"Damn it," Morrison said. "I was going to save that bullet for myself."

It gave him a moment's grace. He ran down the ravine, looking for an opening in its sides. Goldstone glowed at him and sparkled red and purple. And the sandwolves loped along behind him.

Then Morrison stopped. In front of him, the curving ravine ended in a sheer wall.

He put his back against it, holding the revolver by its butt. The wolves stopped five feet from him, gathering themselves for a rush. There were ten or twelve of them, and they were packed three deep in the narrow pass. Overhead, the kites circled, waiting for their turn.

At that moment, Morrison heard the crackling sound of 'porting equipment. A whirlpool appeared above the wolves' heads and they backed hastily away.

"Just in time!" Morrison said.

"In time for what?" asked Williams 4, the postman.

The robot climbed out of the vortex and looked around.

"Well, young man," Williams 4

said, "this is a fine fix you've gotten yourself into. Didn't I warn you? Didn't I advise you to turn back? And now look!"

"You were perfectly right," Morrison said. "What did Max Krاندall send me?"

"Max Krاندall did not, and could not, send a thing."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because it's your birthday," Williams 4 said. "We of the Postal Department always give special service for birthdays. Here you are."

Williams 4 gave him a handful of mail, birthday greetings from Janie, and from his aunts, uncles and cousins on Earth.

"Something else here," Williams 4 said, rummaging in his bag. "I *think* there was something else here. Let me see . . . Yes, here it is."

He handed Morrison a small package.

HASTILY, Morrison tore off the wrappings. It was a birthday present from his Aunt Mina in New Jersey. He opened it. It was a large box of salt-water taffy, direct from Atlantic City.

"Quite a delicacy, I'm told," said Williams 4, who had been peering over his shoulder. "But not very satisfactory under the circumstances. Well, young man, I hate to see anyone die on his birthday. The best I can wish you is a speedy and painless departure."

The robot began walking toward the vortex.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "You can't just leave me like this! I haven't had any water in days! And those wolves—"

"I know," Williams 4 said. "Do you think I feel *happy* about it? Even a robot has some feelings!"

"Then help me."

"I can't. The rules of the Postal Department expressly and categorically forbid it. I remember Abner Lathe making much the same request of me in '97. It took three years for a burial party to reach him."

"You have an emergency telephone, haven't you?" Morrison asked.

"Yes. But I can use it only for personal emergencies."

"Can you at least carry a letter for me? A special delivery letter?"

"Of course I can," the robot postman said. "That's what I'm here for. I can even lend you pencil and paper."

Morrison accepted the pencil and paper and tried to think. If he wrote to Max now, special delivery, Max would have the letter in a matter of hours. But how long would Max need to raise some money and send him water and ammunition? A day, two days? Morrison would have to figure out some way of holding out . . .

"I assume you have a stamp," the robot said.

"I don't," Morrison replied. "But I'll buy one from you. Solidoport special."

"Excellent," said the robot. "We have just put out a new series of Venusborg triangulars. I consider them quite an esthetic accomplishment. They cost three dollars apiece."

"That's fine. Very reasonable. Let me have one."

"There is the question of payment."

"Here," Morrison said, handing the robot a piece of goldenstone worth about five thousand dollars in the rough.

The postman examined the stone, then handed it back. "I'm sorry, I can accept only cash."

"But this is worth more than a thousand postage stamps!" Morrison said. "This is goldenstone!"

"It may well be," Williams 4 said. "But I have never had any assaying knowledge taped into me. Nor is the Venus Postal Service run on a barter system. I'll have to ask for three dollars in bills or coins."

"I don't have it."

"I am very sorry." Williams 4 turned to go.

"You can't just go and let me die!"

"I can and must," Williams 4 said sadly. "I am only a robot, Mr. Morrison. I was made by men, and naturally I partake of some of their sensibilities. That's as it should be.

But I also have my limits, which, in their nature, are similar to the limits most humans have on this harsh planet. And, unlike humans, I cannot transcend my limits."

The robot started to climb into the whirlpool. Morrison stared at him blankly, and saw beyond him the waiting wolfpack. He saw the soft glow of several million dollars' worth of goldenstone shining from the ravine's walls.

Something snapped inside him.

WITH an inarticulate yell, Morrison dived, tackling the robot around the ankles. Williams 4, half in and half out of the 'porting vortex, struggled and kicked, and almost succeeded in shaking Morrison loose. But with a maniac's strength Morrison held on. Inch by inch he dragged the robot out of the vortex, threw him on the ground and pinned him.

"You are disrupting the mail service," said Williams 4.

"That's not all I'm going to disrupt," Morrison growled. "I'm not afraid of dying. That was part of the gamble. But I'm damned if I'm going to die fifteen minutes after I've struck it rich!"

"You have no choice."

"I do. I'm going to use that emergency telephone of yours."

"You can't," Williams 4 said. "I refuse to extrude it. And you could never reach it without the resources of a machine shop."

"Could be," said Morrison. "I plan to find out." He pulled out his empty revolver.

"What are you going to do?" Williams 4 asked.

"I'm going to see if I can smash you into scrap metal *without* the resources of a machine shop. I think your eyecells would be a logical place to begin."

"They would indeed," said the robot. "I have no personal sense of survival, of course. But let me point out that you would be leaving all Venus without a postman. Many would suffer because of your anti-social action."

"I hope so," Morrison said, raising the revolver above his head.

"Also," the robot said hastily, "you would be destroying government property. That is a serious offense."

Morrison laughed and swung the pistol. The robot moved its head quickly, dodging the blow. It tried to wriggle free, but Morrison's two hundred pounds was seated firmly on its thorax.

"I won't miss this time," Morrison promised, hefting the revolver.

"Stop!" Williams 4 said. "It is my duty to protect government property, even if that property happens to be myself. You may use my telephone, Mr. Morrison. Bear in mind that this offense is punishable by a sentence of not more than ten and not less than five years

in the Solar Swamp Penitentiary."

"Let's have that telephone," Morrison said.

THE robot's chest opened and a small telephone extruded. Morrison dialed Max Krandall and explained the situation.

"I see, I see," Krandall said. "All right, I'll try to find Wilkes. But, Tom, I don't know how much I can do. It's after business hours. Most places are closed—"

"Get them open again," said Morrison. "I can pay for it. And get Jim Remstaater out of trouble, too."

"It can't be done just like that. You haven't established any rights to your claim. You haven't even proved that your claim is valuable."

"Look at it," Morrison turned the telephone so that Krandall could see the glowing walls of the ravine.

"Looks real," Krandall said. "But unfortunately, all that glitters is not goldenstone."

"What can we do?" Morrison asked.

"We'll have to take it step by step. I'll 'port you the Public Surveyor. He'll check your claim, establish its limits, and make sure no one else has filed on it. You give him a chunk of goldenstone to take back. A big chunk."

"How can I cut goldenstone? I don't have any tools."

"You'll have to figure out a way.

He'll take the chunk back for assaying. If it's rich enough, you're all set."

"And if it isn't?"

"Perhaps we better not talk about that," Krandall said. "I'll get right to work on this, Tommy. Good luck!"

Morrison signed off. He stood up and helped the robot to its feet.

"In twenty-three years of service," Williams 4 said, "this is the first time anybody has threatened the life of a government postal employee. I must report this to the police authorities at Venusborg, Mr. Morrison. I have no choice."

"I know," Morrison said. "But I guess five or ten years in the penitentiary is better than dying."

"I doubt it. I carry mail there, you know. You will have the opportunity of seeing for yourself in about six months."

"What?" said Morrison, stunned.

"In about six months, after I have completed my mail calls around the planet and returned to Venusborg. A matter like this must be reported in person. But first and foremost, the mails must go through."

"Thanks, Williams. I don't know how—"

"I am simply performing my duty," the robot said as it climbed into the vortex. "If you are still on Venus in six months, I will be delivering your mail to the penitentiary."

"I won't be here," Morrison said. "So long, Williams!"

The robot disappeared into the 'porting vortex. Then the vortex disappeared. Morrison was alone in the Venusian twilight.

HE found an outcropping of goldenstone larger than a man's head. He chipped at it with his pistol butt, and tiny particles danced and shimmered in the air. After an hour, he had put four dents in his revolver, but he had barely scratched the highly refractory surface of the goldenstone.

The sandwolves began to edge forward. Morrison threw stones at them and shouted in his dry, cracked voice. The wolves retreated.

He examined the outcropping again and found a hairline fault running along one edge. He concentrated his blows along the fault.

The goldenstone refused to crack.

Morrison wiped sweat from his eyes and tried to think. A chisel, he needed a chisel . . .

He pulled off his belt. Putting the edge of the steel buckle against the crack, he managed to hammer it in a fraction of an inch. Three more blows drove the buckle firmly into the fault. With another blow, the outcropping sheared off cleanly. He had separated a twenty-pound piece from the cliff. At fifty dollars a troy ounce, this lump





should be worth about twelve thousand dollars — if it assayed out as pure as it looked.

The twilight had turned a deep gray when the Public Surveyor 'ported in. It was a short, squat robot with a conservative crackle-black finish.

"Good day, sir," the surveyor said. "You wish to file a claim? A standard unrestricted mining claim?"

"That's right," Morrison said.

"And where is the center of the aforesaid claim?"

"Huh? The center? I guess I'm standing on it."

"Very well," the robot said.

Extruding a steel tape, it walked rapidly away from Morrison. At a distance of two hundred yards, it stopped. More steel tape fluttered as it walked, flew and climbed a square with Morrison at the center. When it had finished, the surveyor stood for a long time without moving.

"What are you doing?" Morrison asked.

"I'm making depth-photographs of the terrain," the robot said. "It's rather difficult in this light. Couldn't you wait till morning?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll just have to cope," the robot said.

It moved and stood, moved and stood, each subterranean exposure taking longer than the last as the twilight deepened. If it had had

pores, it would have sweated.

"There," said the robot at last, "that takes care of it. Do you have a sample for me to take back?"

"Here it is," Morrison said, hefting the slab of goldenstone and handing it to the surveyor. "Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the robot said. "Except, of course, that you haven't given me the Deed of Search."

MORRISON blinked. "I haven't given you the what?"

"The Deed of Search. That is a government document showing that the claim you are filing on is free, as per government order, of fissionable material in excess of fifty per cent of the total mass to a depth of sixty feet. It's a mere formality, but a necessary one."

"I never heard of it," Morrison said.

"It became a requirement last week," explained the surveyor. "You don't have the Deed? Then I'm afraid your standard unrestricted claim is invalid."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Well," the robot said, "you *could* change your standard unrestricted claim to a special restricted claim. That requires no Deed of Search."

"What does the special restricted part mean?"

"It means that in five hundred years all rights revert to the Government of Venus."

"All right!" Morrison shouted. "Fine! Good! Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the surveyor said. "I shall bring this sample back and have it assayed and evaluated immediately. From it and the depth-photographs we can extrapolate the value and extent of your claim."

"Send me back something to take care of the wolves," Morrison said. "And food. And listen—I want a Prospector's Special."

"Yes, sir. It will all be 'ported to you—if your claim is of sufficient value to warrant the outlay."

The robot climbed into the vortex and vanished.

Time passed, and the wolves edged forward again. They snarled at the rocks Morrison threw, but they didn't retreat. Jaws open and tongues lolling, they crept up the remaining yards between them and the prospector.

Then the leading wolf leaped back and howled. A gleaming vortex had appeared over his head and a rifle had fallen from the vortex, striking him on a forepaw.

The wolves scrambled away. Another rifle fell from the vortex. Then a large box marked *Grenades, Handle With Care*. Then another box marked *Desert Ration K*.

Morrison waited, staring at the gleaming mouth of the vortex. It crossed the sky to a spot a quarter of a mile away and paused

there, and then a great round brass base emerged from the vortex, and the mouth widened to allow an even greater bulge of brass to which the base was attached. The bulge grew higher as the base was lowered to the sand. When the last of it appeared, it stood alone in the horizon-to-horizon expanse, a gigantic ornate brass punchbowl in the desert. The vortex rose and paused again over the bowl.

Morrison waited, his throat raw and aching. Now a small trickle came out of the vortex and splashed down into the bowl. Still Morrison didn't move.

AND then it came. The trickle became a roar that sent the wolves and kites fleeing in terror, and a cataract poured from the vortex to the huge punchbowl.

Morrison began staggering toward it. He should have ordered a canteen, he told himself thirstily, stumbling across the quarter of a mile of sand. But at last he stood beneath the Prospector's Special, higher than a church steeple, wider than a house, filled with water more precious than goldenstone itself. He turned the spigot at the bottom. Water soaked the yellow sands and ran in rivulets down the dune.

He should have ordered a cup or glass, Morrison thought, lying on his back with open mouth.

— ROBERT SHECKLEY

Flower Arrangement

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

*If I was willing to get to the
root of this problem, why were
they so up in the air over it?*

Illustrated by DILLON

LATER on, I couldn't remember quite why I did it. I was sitting there in my usual condition of vague awareness, wishing Barbara's voice would

stop grating away because there was a man who was going to talk to us about St. Augustine grass, and I was hoping he'd say what to do for the brown spots in my lawn.

"Oh, come on, girls," Barbara was saying. "We *ought* to enter the Federated Gardens show. Last year we won third prize."

What Barbara wanted, of course, was for us to urge her to do the Arrangement. She was the only one of us with any talent, and to be fair, Barbara is a real maestro.

Every year we each make a Dried Arrangement and Barbara comes along and says, "Um!" and presses her lips together and waves her hand over your weedy-looking mess and pokes sticks in and out of the starfoam and, *presto*, you have a beautiful Arrangement to keep in your living room until the next Dried Arrangements meeting.

Every year I take it home and everyone says, "Oh, isn't that beautiful! Did you make it?" And of course I had been rather pretending I had made it, only if somebody asked me about it directly, I had to say, "No, Barbara James made it." I frequently wished I had the courage to rush out of the Dried Arrangements meeting before she got to me and set my weedy, wispy Arrangement on the buffet and leave it there.

Needless to say, I do not have this kind of courage.

Only as Barbara got to the part where she says, "O.K. Any volunteers?" something popped inside of me and I shot my hand up and said, "I'd be glad to have a try at it."

Barbara's mouth quirked a little, because she knew perfectly well what kind of Arrangements I make, and because she had probably already decided exactly what sort of Arrangement the Eastbank Garden Group was going to enter in the Federated Gardens show.

But she said, "That's fine, Sally Jo. You're to use camellias in it somewhere. I think you'd do best with a simple fan Arrangement. I'll mail you their rules book, and if you'd like any — er — advice, why, I'd be glad to help."

That was it, of course. She wasn't going to let it be my Arrangement at all.

I didn't even hear what the man said about St. Augustine grass. All the time I was thinking, thinking, thinking. Was there any kind of Arrangement I could make that Barbara couldn't do better? Something really different, so that when I looked at it, I wouldn't have to picture Barbara pressing her lips together?

IT was about eleven o'clock at night when I got home, and of course Ronald was asleep, but I just couldn't bear this by myself.

"Ronald!" I cried in a loud whisper so as not to wake Tommy. "Do you know what I've done!"

Ronald snuffled irritably, then sat up with a jerk and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"You ran over somebody!"

"No. I volunteered to make the flower Arrangement for the Federated Gardens show!"

Ronald mumbled blasphemies and sank back into his pillow.

"Darling, please stay awake. You see, the thing is, I'm actually going to do this. Only there's the matter of Barbara. Now, if I can only find something—come to think of it, there's the Hogarth Curve. Barbara can do fans or Japanese things or crescents, but the one thing Barbara has never won a prize on is the Hogarth Curve. It tends to droop, you see. Darling..."

But he was asleep.

For a wild moment I even considered waking up Tommy, just to have someone to talk to.

The wild moment passed and I eyed the telephone. But there isn't anyone you can call up at eleven o'clock at night and say, "About the Hogarth Curve—"

I crossed my arms over my chest and slipped my feet out of my shoes so I could stride up and down the house quietly. Naturally I couldn't think of anything. I never can when I try.

But it hit me the next day. I was putting some appliqué on a pot holder for the bazaar in January—I loathe appliqué—and there it was!

The Hogarth Curve wouldn't do, because while Barbara wasn't really successful with that kind of Arrangement, she could look at it and

immediately see what was wrong. But the Hogarth Curve isn't the only line in the world. Lines reminded me of math, and math reminded me of that *Mathematics for Morons* book Ronald brought home in one of his numerous unsuccessful attempts to improve my thinking ability.

I stuck my finger with a needle, hissed at the stab, held the pot holder carefully away so as not to get blood on it. Appliqué, ha!

There was *something* in that book I wanted to remember. Some really interesting line. I grabbed the book and started down the index. B. I was sure it began with a B. No. Moebius Strip. That was it.

Feverishly, I flipped the pages back to find out what it was that was so interesting about the Moebius Strip, and whether it could be done with an aspidistra leaf soaked in glycerin.

"Brrring!" went the alarm clock, which I always reset in the morning to tell me to go get Tommy.

"Damn, damn, damn," I said, glancing hastily around at the part on Moebius Strips. There were other interesting-looking lines, but I just had a feeling the Moebius one was right.

WALKING into the kindergarten, I peered around for Tommy.

"Everything all right?" Miss Potter asked.

"Um? Oh." I guess I had a glazed look in my eyes. "Come to think of it, I've been pondering it all morning and I haven't told anybody yet. I'm going to make the Arrangement for the Federated Gardens show."

"How nice! You could make a real family project out of it!" Miss Potter said with her usual misplaced enthusiasm. "Tommy loves to make things!"

"I know."

Tommy talked all the way home, but I didn't hear a word he said.

"Make yourself a peanut butter sandwich," I said when I pushed open the back door.

"Boys my age need a good hot lunch."

"My mother used to have to force me to eat a good hot lunch. I'd have liked nothing better than to come home and make myself a peanut butter sandwich."

Tommy gave me his accusatory look.

"Oh, all right," I said.

AFTER lunch, we went out in the garage where I have my lab—ferns being pressed between newspapers, cattails hanging up to dry, my bucket of things in glycerin.

"What I need," I mused, "is the biggest aspidistra in the world."

I found a really nice one. Brownish, of course, but with a reddish streak and hints of deep green in

it. And best of all, a light stripe right down the middle.

"This," I said, "is going to be the very soul of our flower arrangement."

"What's a soul?"

"A soul . . ." The telephone rang. I am not always this fortunate.

"I wanted to let you know," Barbara said, "that I've got the perfect container for your Arrangement. A pale blue cloisonné bowl. Oval. Just the thing for a fan Arrangement."

"I'm not making a fan Arrangement."

"No? Well, I think it would do very nicely for one of the Japanese Arrangements."

"I'm not using Japanese lines," I said.

There was a silence. Then, "You're not going to try a Hogarth Curve!"

"No. It's not the sort of thing you can describe, Barbara. You'll just have to see it. When I'm ready."

"I can come by any evening." Fortunately, Barbara works. "Suppose I come by this evening and bring you the bowl?"

"I already have a base," I lied. "I'll call you when I have the Arrangement in shape."

"I didn't mean to interfere."

"It isn't that. It's that the thing is — gestating. I need to *feel* it for a while."

"Of course," Barbara said, as though I had just told her I was calling in a medium.

A BASE. Really, I didn't want any base at all. I needed something that was nothing.

The pastry board was too big.

But I have a lovely chopping board, oblong, just the right size. I scrubbed the onion and garlic smell out of it as best I could and stuck on a piece of starfoam with floral clay.

Now the Moebius Strip.

"Tommy!"

His eyes were wide and puzzled. He didn't know what he'd done.

"Why did you tear Mama's aspidistra leaf into strips?" A whole bunch of them, meeting at the stem.

"It's prettier that way."

I could see what he meant. There was something festive-looking about it. Like streamers tied to a stick.

"Let's try it like it is," Tommy said.

He picks up these insidious cooperative suggestions from Miss Potter, and he has me in the midst of family projects before I'm aware of what's going on.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to try. Hand me a piece of that green wire."

I gathered the ends of the streamers together, carefully half-looped them and wired them to the bottom of the stem, so that the stem was part of the curve, too. They were pliable, but not limp or crackly, from the glycerin. My idea was to make a Dried Arrangement and

then wire in some camellias at the last minute.

If I had been a purist, I would have left the Arrangement the way it was, with just the one leaf. Tommy and I, however, are not purists.

"Go out into the garage and get me six dried okra pods off the shelf," I said. "I am a fairy godmother."

"Which ones is the okra?" Tommy asked.

"The stripy ones."

Tommy was back in a flash. "What are you going to turn them into?"

"A handsome young Dried Arrangement."

"Can I stick some in?"

"One."

I wired them all and put in five, their slight crescents all curving in the same direction. Tommy put the sixth one in, curving, of course, in the wrong direction.

Still, you know, it didn't look bad.

"Now," I said, "we need something behind it. For a background. Something pale. Go into the garage," I commanded, waving my magic floral wire, "and get me four ferns. They're between the sheets of newspaper."

It's obvious what's wrong with all this. You should *never* use an even number of things in a flower arrangement. It's gauche and bourgeois and almost as bad as serving iced sherry.

JUST as I was really getting started, Ronald came in demanding dinner.

"How am I ever going to get my Arrangement made if people keep interrupting?" I said, because I was knee-deep in weeds and it was infuriating to have to stop. "Don't you and Tommy ever think of anything but food?"

"Sally Jo!"

I opened cans of this and that, like the ladies on television. Ronald and Tommy ate morosely and of course the Tylers dropped by after dinner and Marcelle said, "What is *that*?" And I said, "Oh, it isn't finished yet," and Tommy said, "I helped," and Marcelle said, "That's awfully clever of Tommy to help make something. But tell me, dear, have you ever wondered about his subconscious?"

No, I hadn't, but it was *my* subconscious, and after that I kept wondering, Why is my subconscious like a Moebius Strip? The best answer I could come up with was that it's because it has a half-twist in it.

But the next morning I got the fern in exactly right, balancing the five okra pods with three large ferns and the wrong-way one with a small fern. The aspidistra showed up beautifully against the fragile dried road fern.

Then, of course, Tommy and Ronald revolted against my Creative Period, each in his own way.

Tommy fell down and split his lip wide open, requiring stitches, and Ronald came down with the flu, requiring continuous bed care.

I'd rather be locked up with two live octopi.

And then Marcelle called and said the pot holders *had* to be done by the next week, so every time I had an odd moment I had to sit down and work on that wretched appliqué.

"I'll resign!" I screamed one day, hurling a half-appliquéd pot holder across the room. "Do you know that I still have the bias binding to sew on? And, Ronald, they're *round*."

"For God's sake, resign! I've never heard of making pot holders for a garden club, anyway."

"It's for our bazaar. And I can't resign before the show. I wouldn't be able to make the Arrangement."

"Which would suit me just fine," Ronald said. "Where's my pipe?"

"Did you look on your pipe rack?"

"There's a tube of toothpaste on my pipe rack."

"Then your pipe's in the medicine cabinet."

By the time Tommy was back in school and Ronald was back at work, I had *one* day to finish my Arrangement in.

BARBARA, of course, had been calling every night "to find out how everybody is," and hinting for me to let her take over.



Somewhere, probably out of sheer irritation, I found the strength of mind to refuse her.

"But you'll need my Pink Perfections," Barbara said. "After all, it's a camellia show."

"Couldn't you meet me before the show? I'm going over at eight o'clock and Ronald's going to drop Tommy off at school for me. The show doesn't start until nine. You could stop by on the way to work."

"I'll be there at eight o'clock," Barbara said. "How many Pink Perfections do you want me to bring? Three? Five?"

"Four," I said, and hung up before she could even gasp.

I worked most of the night. I filled in the curve of the Moebius Strip with some soft, sort of thistle down things. I covered the star-foam with curly moss and left the rest of the chopping board bare. I worked in the mindless way that produces the best effect.

The alarm went off at six. I hopped out of bed and darted about the chilly house to get my family clothed and fed and out. I was more excited than I ought to have been over a flower show. I'd stuck my neck out too far, refusing to let Barbara help. And using a totally unorthodox Arrangement. And furthermore — you don't ordinarily think of Flower Arranging as a vice, but it was something nasty in me that made me volunteer to do it, and to exclude Bar-

bara, who after all needs to make Flower Arrangements because she doesn't have any children. And if one is going to have a vice at all, and neglect home and family and friends, one ought to be able to say, "There, at least I got a prize."

I broke the eggs into a bowl and got the bacon started. Then I popped into the living room and turned the light on for a quick look at my Moebius Strip. There was something not quite right about it. For one thing, it no longer looked like a Moebius Strip. On the other hand, it didn't look *not* like a Moebius Strip.

The bacon started complaining and I went to separate the pieces and at this point Tommy woke up and informed me that he was wet, as is his tendency on cold mornings. Then Ron said he couldn't find his cuff links and the cat started yowling to come in and I didn't have time to think about anything at all.

Until I started in to get my flower Arrangement to bring to the John D. Ransom auditorium, where the show was going to be. Then Tommy said, "I fixed it for you." And so he had. It looked Moebius, only more so.

Barbara was waiting for me just inside the door, her arms wrapped around herself, doing a little two-step to warm up. The auditorium was like a vault and the heating system was just getting started, with random, thunderous shrieks.

"Why, Sally Jo!" Barbara cried, stopping in mid-two-step. "It's *interesting*."

I CARRIED the Arrangement over to the niche marked **EAST-BANK GARDEN GROUP. ARRANGEMENT BY SALLY JO WARNER.** I set it down carefully, though Barbara says an Arrangement should always be so tight you can turn it upside down and shake it.

Interesting! I had a moment of wild triumph and then I was a little ashamed of myself. Barbara was generous enough to like it.

"However," Barbara said, pressing her lips together and making me feel normal again, "where are we going to put the Pink Perfections?"

Barbara opened the shallow box with four camellias in it. They were, of course, perfect and spotless and exactly alike. I can understand how Barbara manages to discipline her house and her dog and her husband, but I have never figured out how anyone can discipline flowers.

"The camellias? Oh, yes, the camellias . . ."

There was a baffled bellow from Ronald. He was trying to get Tommy's snowsuit off. I ran over before the zipper or Tommy could get jammed. The instant I had the snowsuit off, there was a wail from Tommy. "She ruined my Flower Arrangement!"

My heart sank. "No, no, dear," I said, hurrying after him to where Barbara was, but he was right. There were bits of weed and fluff piled up on the floor and a gleam of joy in Barbara's eyes, and there was nothing left of the fascinating shape Tommy and I had made. "See?" I went on. "It's beautiful. It's a perfect Hogarth Curve." It was. It didn't droop at all. And Barbara had made the Arrangement.

"There was something funny in there," Barbara said. "I thought it must be Tommy's, so I saved it."

"It's my inside-out balloon," Tommy said, his chin quivering, "and she turned it back right-side in!"

It was Tommy's multi-colored balloon, and it really didn't look much like a balloon any more, though it was still blown up. "How did your balloon get in there?"

"I put it in," Tommy said, "to make the Arrangement more rounder. It's the roundest thing I ever made." Tears were gathering in his eyes.

"Now, dear, I don't know why I didn't see it."

"I put it in after you made it. Then I blew it up and tied it and poked in the end. It was the roundest thing in the whole world!"

"But it's still tied! See? So nobody could have turned it right-side out. It looks the same on both sides."

"No, it don't. The other side got

magnetic paint on it. That's why the balloon got ripples in it."

Ron had been standing around looking impatient and he said, "Tommy, there's no such thing as magnetic paint."

"There is, too," Tommy said. "I made it."

"How did you make it?"

"You mix up silver paint like you use for Christmas Arrangements and you add that silver glitter that you sprinkle and then you add all the old magnets you have around and you stir it good."

"How many old magnets?" I asked.

"Lots and lots and lots."

"Then what?"

"Then you turn the balloon inside out and blow it up and pinch the end with a clothes pin and paint it and then when it's dry you let the air out."

"And just why do you do all this?" Ron asked.

THAT was a silly question and Tommy didn't bother to answer it.

"What about the magnets?" I asked.

"You bury them in the back yard."

"Oh. And do metal things stick on the magnetic paint?"

"Well — hair does, if you brush it first."

"Metal things."

"I *think* they do. A teeny bit. But

now it's all on the wrong side and it's ruined."

"I have to get to work," Ron said.

"Here, catch." I tossed the balloon to Tommy.

It stayed up in the middle of the air.

"See?" Tommy said. "It's no good no more."

We all stood staring, in a state of shock.

"It's a funny shape," Ron said finally. "Those puckers sort of go *in* and if you follow that striated band . . . if you follow . . ."

I was trying to follow it with my eyes, too.

". . . you get vertigo," Ron finished, looking off in another direction.

"Yes, you do," I said. "Well, we can't just leave it here. Tommy, would you like to take it to show Miss Potter?"

"Miss Potter, hell!" Ron exclaimed. "There's something extraordinary about this. I'm going to take it down to work with me and let the boys at the lab have a look at it. I've never seen anything that just stayed in mid-air like that. You notice it doesn't seem to float, as it would if it contained a gas, and . . ."

But I was busy apologizing to Barbara for Tommy's manners and assuring her the Hogarth Curve was beautiful.

I pinned the left-over camellia in my hair, because I felt I deserved something, and Ron said

he'd drop Tommy and me off at kindergarten.

"Isn't it marvelous," I asked Ron as I wiped off the windshield, because Tommy kept huffing on it, "to have a son who's an important scientist before the age of six?"

"Now don't be getting delusions of grandeur about him," Ron said. "Whatever you and he made was purely accidental."

"That goes to show what *you* know about the scientific method. I was making a Moebius Arrangement and Tommy was making the roundest thing in the whole world, and when you're working on something and something else happens, something scientifically important, it's called—I can't remember what it's called, but it's a perfectly good word beginning with R. Or maybe L."

"Serendipity. But you and Tommy . . . Never mind."

LATER on in the morning, Ron called to tell me to go see a man named Craddock over at the lab, and I'd have to go by myself because Ron was busy, and I said, "All right," but it wasn't all right. The thought of going to that strange place to talk to important men was terrifying.

I opened my closet and looked unhappily through my inappropriate house dresses and equally inappropriate party dresses. I finally decided on my black skirt, dark

gray sweater and white cotton blouse, which I hoped would give the impression of a businesslike outfit.

On the way down on the streetcar, I found a woman staring at me and I realized I had been practicing my facial expression. It was the one where I hang a cigarette out of the side of my mouth, narrow my eyes to a slit, and say, "I'm Warner. You Craddock?"

What actually happened was that an office boy said, "What are you so nervous about, lady?" and brought me through a maze of forbidding-looking chambers and deposited me on a bench facing a back that was, presumably, Craddock's.

I sat there trying to decide whether to address him or just wait, when he turned, looked at me, and jumped two feet.

"I didn't know anyone was there," he explained, and since he was the one who had acted a little silly, I felt much better about him immediately.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just sitting here trying to decide . . ." That wouldn't do. "My name's Warner," I said, omitting the facial expression.

"Dr. Warner?"

"Sally Jo Warner."

"And you discovered this new—force field?"

"If you mean the right-side-inside-out balloon," I answered, "yes."

With my son, Thomas." I decided that if he was going to be a scientist, we should stop calling him Tommy.

CRADDOCK was one of those thin, pale, freckled-all-over people with eyes the color of the rims of his horn-rimmed glasses and he wore the same general expression of stubborn intentness that Tommy has. And I could sense in his expression the same scorn for me that Tommy so frequently has.

"I'd like to discuss this with your son," he said.

Of course. *I* couldn't be expected to say anything sensible.

"Thomas has school in the mornings," I said.

"Ah? Um. Which school?"

"Miss Nicholls."

"Miss—"

"It's a small private school. Kindergarten through third grade."

"A third-grade child did this!"

"No. Kindergarten. And I was not without influence in this discovery. I went to Grey Rock Junior College."

"Um. Sciences?"

"Yes."

"I mean what sciences?"

"We learned all the sciences in one course. Chemistry, biology, physics and—well, I'd have to look in the book to remember the others."

"Never mind," Craddock said, a

shudder going through his slight, clattery frame. "Just tell me how you did this." He nodded at the balloon, which was encased in a glass box with a tube sort of thing leading into it.

"Well, first you take an aspidistra leaf . . ." I began, and went on from there. Craddock wrote it all down, though he kept saying, "I just don't see how the balloon fits into all this," and finally I said, "Now we get to the balloon. And the magnetic paint."

"Where did you get the magnetic paint?"

"My colleague made it."

Craddock was awfully picayunish about details. "How much silver paint? How much is 'the rest of a pack of glitter'?" Then he was disturbed because lots and lots and lots of magnets is eight.

When I got to the part where Barbara made a Hogarth Curve out of my Moebius Strip, I asked him for a cigarette because I was still upset over it.

"I know how you feel," Craddock said, being agreeable for the first time. "I don't think it's right to make a Hogarth Curve out of a Moebius Strip, either. I wouldn't even think it was possible."

"Well, that's all," I said, and Craddock grabbed my cigarette before I dropped it into what looked like an empty dish. "I have to rush off and pick up my colleague at kindergarten."

ON the way to Miss Nicholls, my mind was afire with ambition. Tommy would appear on TV. Everyone would forget about the time Tommy smeared Miss Potter's chair with mucilage right before she sat down. He'd be offered scholarships to MIT. He'd dictate articles for scientific journals and I'd write them up.

And if anyone ever made remarks about my thinking ability again, I'd just say, "My method produces results."

About two o'clock that afternoon, Craddock called and bawled, "The force field is leaking! Another hour and it'll all be gone!"

"Stop sounding as though it's my fault," I said.

"Sorry. I'm just anxious."

"Why don't you catch the drippings in a pot or something?"

"We tried to. But you should see the cloud chamber."

I said, "I'm sure the cloud chamber is very interesting," because it was none of his business if I didn't know what a cloud chamber was.

"The lines just wiggle and disappear into another dimension. I don't know how else to describe it."

"What's making it leak?"

"There's something unusual in the nuclei of the atoms. They're decaying."

"Tommy blew up the balloon," I said, and wondered if he had cavities, though of course it was a different kind of decay. Still the

thought made me a little nervous.

"We're getting photographs of everything," Craddock went on, "but what's worrying us is that we haven't been able to duplicate the — uh — experiment."

"I'll bet you didn't soak the aspidistra in glycerin. You couldn't have. There hasn't been time."

"Glycerin wouldn't have anything to do with it. For that matter, neither would the aspidistra."

"Plants," I informed him, "even dried ones, have all sorts of influence. If you put a bouquet of roses in a room, the whole room and all the furniture is a different shape."

"That's your subjective reaction. It's because you like roses."

"There! That proves my point! Why does the lamb love Mary so?"

CRADDOCK choked a little. "Mrs. Warner . . . all right, why does the lamb love Mary so?"

"They learn things like this at Miss Nicholls," I pointed out. "The answer is, 'Mary loves the lamb, you know.' People like roses because roses like people. Which means roses have something you don't know about."

"All right, there are things I don't know. The first thing I don't know is how to carry on an intelligible conversation with you. But let's skip everything except what I called you for. Will you and your colleague please make another of those balloon affairs?"

"I doubt if it can be done."

"Why? If there are any materials you need, I can certainly—"

"It isn't that. It's — well, whatever we do, it's going to be a little bit different. And I don't know if Tommy can find where he buried the magnets. But I'll try."

But before I went shouting around for Tommy, I called Barbara, because something had occurred to me while I was talking to Craddock and it was only decent to tell Barbara.

"What time," I asked, "do the judges come around tonight?"

"About seven-thirty," Barbara said.

"I'm sorry, but you ought to know. We're not going to win."

"What?"

"Your Hogarth Curve," I said, thinking of the leaking balloon, "is going to droop at three o'clock," and left the explanation for later.

I found Tommy in the back yard, deeply involved with sticks and bits of string and old nails.

I knew immediately and sadly what he was doing.

It was too bad Tommy wasn't going to be a famous scientist before the age of six, but that was mostly just a joke. And it was too bad the Eastbank Garden Group wasn't going to win a prize in the Federated Gardens Show, but it was no longer my Arrangement,

anyway, and Barbara's always winning other prizes for us. And it was too bad Craddock wasn't going to have his force field, but he hadn't been very nice about the whole thing.

No, the real tragedy was that Tommy was going to be bitterly unhappy about something I had absolutely no control over.

I CALLED Craddock and tried to explain to him why Tommy would never in the world get interested in making another Moebius Strip thing. And there's no way to make a child create something, — any more than you can make him eat.

"You see," I told Craddock, who was sputtering helplessly on the other end of the line, "he's already made the roundest thing in the whole world. It's not really hard to make the roundest thing in the whole world. I mean, things *tend* to be round, and all you have to do is follow a tendency. But now he's working on something else and he'll keep at it and won't think about anything else and it's going to be tragic when he finds out it just can't be done."

"And what is he trying to do?" Craddock managed to say.

"He's trying to make the squarest thing in the whole world."

— ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

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Sales Talk

BY CON BLOMBERG

*To live different and exciting
lives, all I had to do was sign
here—and give up my own life!*

Illustrated by MORROW

LOOKING out the window, I saw them crossing the court toward the building — two of them. One, the taller with yellow hair, was carrying a flat, expensive briefcase, and the other, of course, was carrying the large square box that contained the Sim.

The buzzer sounded, announcing them at the door, and I opened it with mixed feelings. I wasn't sure myself how I would act and—

well, you hear so many stories about EL, and this was really my first contact with them.

They were standing out in front, looking just like a couple of door-to-door salesmen. And that's just what they were, even if they were called Electro Medical Consultants. Just a fancy name for salesmen.

They were very neat in appearance, just as good salesmen should

be. Their hats looked new and so did their shoes.

"Ah, Mr. Gaines," said the yellow-haired one, sticking out his neatly manicured but definitely masculine hand, "I'm very happy to meet you, sir." His grin could only be described as sincerely boyish.

"Come in," I said, feeling like smiling back, so effectively pleasant were their grins. "Come in and sit down, won't you?"

So they came in, doffing their hats, and sat down in two chairs that I ordinarily didn't use. They seemed to know instinctively which was *my* favorite chair. Oh, they were smooth!

"Now, Mr. Gaines," said the light-haired man, "perhaps I should start off with a little introduction all around and a short explanation of what Electronic Living can mean to you."

No one had mentioned EL up to that point, yet they knew without a doubt that I had correctly identified them. Talk about confidence—it was like a physical force in the room.

"I'm Jake Long and this is Arnie Blik," said the light-haired one, rising and gripping my hand with a warm, dry, just right handshake.

"Pleased to meet you," said Blik, gripping my hand in turn with an identical warm, dry, just right handshake.

"I'm going to ask you for a bit

of your time," said Long, "and I certainly hope you can grant us a few minutes without too much inconvenience."

I MURMURED something about having plenty of time. That was a laugh, and he and I both knew it. I had so little to do, I almost welcomed them just for sheer entertainment value.

"Well, that's fine," said Long, "but rest assured we aren't going to try to waste any of your time. We intend to make it short and sweet, as they say." He did such a good job of keeping up the fiction of me being a busy man that I almost believed it myself.

"You probably know more about Electronic Living than I do," he said, and I felt for an instant that I did, "but we'll go over it anyway just so you understand me a little better. You'll remember back in 1958-1959 there was a lot of work done — or I should say a beginning made — in developing an electronic eye for people who had lost their eyesight. This was a start of Electronic Living in its crudest form. These early pioneers, using what little knowledge was available of the brain then, were actually able to insert a probe in the brain and enable the blind person to 'see' light. At first it was just the difference between light and dark, but after a while they did develop a kind of vision — and then finally,

after much work, the system grew into actual electronic vision.

"This was, as I said, the start of Electronic Living because it advanced the basic premise that the brain can utilize outside electrical impulses for its own purposes. And of course it wasn't long before some experimenters had rigged up a human television receiver. What they did was set up a series of brain probes which were directly connected to a small television receiving apparatus, and the subject could then 'see' the broadcast image without the use of his eyes.

"Since this rough beginning, we at El have done a lot of work, and we are now able to reproduce every sort of physical sensation known to man through electronic brain connections.

"And recently, as a further refinement, we have been able to capture internal brain voltages and use them to reproduce thoughtlike sensations. Unfortunately, these are still in the realm of strong emotions and not true thoughts, but they are extremely effective.

"Now, it is this combination of physical sensation voltages and internal brain voltages, when fed into your brain from a simple tape like this, that produces what we call Electronic Living."

With that he pulled a piece of tape out of his pocket as if pro-

ducing an elephant from a thimble.

ARNIE Blik hadn't said a word up to this point. He had hung on every word his partner uttered as though it were all new to him. Now he took up the song.

"May I ask if you've ever experienced Electric Living?" he asked.

"No," I said. I really had once or twice, but I figured it was none of his business.

"Ah. Well, if you have no objection, I'd like to use this Simulator here for a few minutes and give you a bare idea of what's going on in Electronic Living today."

"Sure," I said. "Go right ahead."

Blik opened up the Sim and fished out a hat that was shaped much like a medieval knight's helmet, except that it had a couple of big fat wires connected to it at the back.

"Just a moment while I tune it in," Blik said, lowering the helmet part way over his head. He closed his eyes and began fiddling with a series of small knots and buttons which were mounted inside the case. Finally he took it off his head and approached me, carrying this ridiculous helmet like it was a crown on a velvet pillow.

"You will be experiencing a basketball player," he said, and plopped it down over my head.

When the helmet came down,

there was a momentary blank period, and then suddenly I was a basketball player who was playing a fast professional game. I was good, or should say he was? He felt exultation because his team was ahead and he'd put them there with a difficult shot. I could feel the pounding of his heart and the strain of his chest as he gulped in huge quantities of air. His eyes ranged around the court, following his teammates and opponents.

It was something, all right, but not everything, because on top of the sensations and emotions of the basketball player, I was getting another series of feelings and emotion which were my own.

Superimposed on the other players on the court was the image of my own living room with the two men watching me. Over the smell of sweat of the basketball players came the odor of my apartment. Above the sensation of running, jumping and colliding with other players was the sensation of sitting in my favorite chair with a weight on my head.

In short, I was two people at one time.

Even the emotions of the basketball player — joy at making a basket, a flare of rage at a rough opponent, and the surge of hope that a teammate would come through — were clouded over with my own emotions of not completely accepting as right the whole

concept of EL, coupled with the feeling that I didn't want to show any reaction in front of the EL men.

After a short time, Blik removed the Sim, and the basketball player's Life Experience faded away. The two EL men looked at me expectantly.

"Hmmm," I said, forcing myself to appear neutral. They did not seem to be disappointed by my reaction or lack of it.

"**Q**UITE an experience, wasn't it?" said Blik, putting the Sim down on the floor. "Of course you realize that you don't get the full effect because you actually have two primary sets of electric images going into the brain. We never have been able to overcome the subject's own real physical and mental sensation with a device that works outside the skull."

"But I'm sure Mr. Gaines gets the idea," said Long.

"I'm sure I do," I said. The damn thing was plenty intriguing, but somehow, despite all its good points, I wasn't really sold on it.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in the kind of thing we have programmed for our EL subscribers," said Long with a kindly smile. "If you are someone who likes active sports, we can give you an evening of that kind of thing. We don't program sports in the daytime or early evening because it interferes with



the regular sports consumers, but it's nice to have later on in the evening if you like it."

I nodded in what I hoped was a cold manner.

"Perhaps you'd like the milieu built up around a hard-working farmer or laborer for a daytime program. A certain amount of physical labor which is coupled with a strong emotion of accomplishment and pride. An excellent milieu and one of our most popular currently."

"Very interesting," I said non-committally, intrigued in spite of myself.

Then it was Blik's turn. "If you are interested in the social type of thing, we have several new milieus that fit right in with this sort of thing. I can recall one of a formal dinner party which has strong emotional connotations of well-being and a sense of — grandeur — yes, grandeur in the old meaning of the word. And in this same milieu it is possible to get the bon-vivant type of thing. You know, the raconteur who is a real spellbinder. That has a strong emotion of ego-fulfillment."

"Very interesting," I said again, "but it doesn't quite fill the bill as far as I'm —"

"Arnie, we've been overlooking the obvious," said Long. "Mr. Gaines is looking more for the intellectual type of Life Experience. Now, I recall one of a sculptor

which has a fine feel to it. Extremely intellectual and yet artistically creative, if you know what I mean. And then there's an extremely thrilling milieu dealing with a symphony conductor in which there is an absolute physical thrill that is audio-inspired. Just the thing for anyone who is an audiophile, I'd say."

I had to admit that it was beginning to sound more appealing all the time and I found myself wondering just which Life Experience one would pick first if he were to go EL.

"Of course," said Blik, with a manly grin, "we have the thing we call our 'playboy milieu' which is strictly a sensual sort of a thing. It often appeals rather strongly to new subscribers, although I have to warn you that it soon becomes an Experience which palls on you."

HE almost had me with that one, because after all I have normal male curiosity and all that, and naturally it's always these "playboy milieus" that you hear the most about among people who are non-EL subscribers. Yes, for a minute or two there, I was teetering on the brink, but my better sense did ultimately win out and I could feel the emotion of resistance welling up inside me.

"Well, actually, gentlemen, it isn't a case of not finding the right milieu, because I'm sure you have

anything that I could ever want. It's more on philosophical grounds that I find that I hesitate to go along with Electronic Living," I said boldly. Just saying it gave me a tremendous lift.

"Ah," said Long, looking at the ceiling and making a tent of his fingers in front of his chest. "I always enjoy talking with a man who has a philosophical bent. In fact," he said, unfolding the tent and leaning close to me and lowering his voice a little, "it's the one big pleasure I get out of this job."

"I'm afraid that I have to agree with you there, Jack," said Blik, digging his toe into the rug in a distinctly boyish manner.

"**W**HY don't you sort of fill us in on your thinking, Mr. Gaines?" urged Long.

"Well," I said, feeling warm under the collar and allowing my hand to tremble slightly with emotion as I got into what I now realized was the meat of my resistance to EL. "Well, let's take it from the word go. If I sign up with you now, I'll go down to the Electronic Living Center tomorrow or the next day and they'll take me into an operating room and put some tiny probes into my brain, and aside from a momentary twinge or two, I won't feel a thing. And then when it's over I'll walk out of the room looking just the way I did before, except that I'll have a neat

little connection mounted high on the left side of my head where it can be tastefully covered with hair when not in use.

"And I'll probably come back to this apartment to find the Electronic Living Machine installed in that corner, tastefully decorated to look like an old-fashioned antique bookcase, or a modern bar, or whatever I want it to look like. But whatever it looks like, there will be a comfortable chair unobtrusively attached to the ELM and sooner or later I'll sit down in that chair and read over the list of Life Experiences and select one.

"Then I'll sink back in the chair and the little connection on my head will fit neatly into another little connection on the chair, because my chair will fit only me, and it will fit me perfectly.

"And then, while I drift off to EL-land, the chair will unfold around me so that all sight and sound and almost all feeling will disappear and I'll be like a chrysalis in a cocoon.

"So for two or three or eight hours I'll stay inside the cocoon, living another person's life. And while I'm in there, everyone will be sighing a sigh of relief that here is another potential producer who has finally given up the ghost and turned consumer.

"Then when the tape is through, the cocoon will open and I'll wake up tired or refreshed or satiated or

somehow changed, and then I'll get out to the food center and dial a meal or call someone up, or go out and walk around or something."

I WAS really getting wound up, but Long broke in on me. "Tell me a little more," he said, "about that one idea, will you? You know, the idea about how you will give up being a producer and will be all consumer?"

"I was just coming to that," I said hotly. "Yes, they'll probably enroll my name on the EL subscribers roll with a big cheer, and all my non-EL friends will hear about it and they'll raise their eyebrows, or maybe they'll sign up too."

"But the point is this. Is it right for me, a big, strong, healthy human being with powers of perception and reasoning and a capability for work and creativeness—is it right for me to substitute this dream world of EL for actual real thinking, or doing, or creating? Do any of us have the right to subvert our normal impulses for creation and for living in this way?"

"A good question," said Long with a sigh. "I'm afraid he's put it in pretty unanswerable terms, all right. Except for one minor point, I couldn't help but agree with everything he said, in spite of the fact that I — well, I'm sold on EL, naturally."

We sat for a while just sort of gazing around at nothing.

Finally Blik spoke up. "What was that one point that you disagreed on Jack?" he asked his partner. "I've been running Mr. Gaines' statement over in my mind and I can't seem to find the flaw you mentioned."

"Oh, it was nothing," said Long impatiently. "Just a minor point."

"No, I mean it," said Blik. "I'd really like to know."

"Not worth talking about. Let's pack up and not take any more of Mr. Gaines' time."

"Come on, Jack, tell me what it was," said Blik, in a rather positive way, I thought.

"Really, Arnie," said Long, firing up a little, "take it easy, will you? We don't want to have to argue about some little point that doesn't mean anything. Just forget it."

His attitude changed quickly from irritation to downright nastiness. Apparently, as head of the sales team, he wasn't going to take anything from a subordinate. It kind of irritated me in turn, because he gave me the impression that he felt as if he was too good to talk with us about it.

"All right, all right," said Blik, "the hell with it. So it was a minor point."

"Why not tell him?" I asked Long, cutting in quickly as Blik made a move to pack up the Sim.

LONG turned toward me with a supercilious look that put me in the same category as assistants who had the temerity to question the boss. Then in an instant the mask returned and he was just as polite and smooth as ever — but I'd seen the crack in the slickness before he changed. It really got me where I live. That's one thing I can't stand — an assault on the ego by a slick bum like that, who thinks he's so good.

"Oh, I don't see how it can be that small a point," I said. "Especially if you thought of it." I said the last part as insultingly as I knew how, and I saw the color rise in his face.

"Yes, speak up," said Blik, siding with me. "He's got a right to know."

"All right," said Long with some asperity that even the professional mask couldn't hide, "but I warn you that it's strictly a minor point."

"So it's a minor," said Blik. "Tell us."

"The point is," said Long, after a short pause to collect his thoughts, "that EL fills a need for some people. You see, with the big upsurge in automation years ago, it got harder and harder for a production-oriented economy to survive. Jobs got fewer and easier. People were thrown out of work. During the early years of automation, there was a lot of population

displacement because of a lack of jobs, and this made for a lot of economic juggling which really didn't help matters.

"It wasn't until some ten years ago that people finally came to the conclusion that production was outstripping the need for labor and that, in fact, production was beginning to become a burden on the economy. And so they turned things around a bit. Instead of giving rewards and subsidies to the production end of the economy, they began giving it to the consuming end. That was really the only way out of the hole.

"But it was soon found that people are not merely organisms geared to consume. At first it was grand and glorious, but after a bit the urge to create, to work, to think began to assert itself strongly, and that's where EL came along. EL was developed to give unsatisfied people satisfactions that they couldn't get anywhere else. They couldn't be allowed to produce because that was what was wrecking things. So they had to be provided with a synthetic 'production-fulfillment.'

"Today these producer-minded people can get any sort of satisfaction they need from EL, and it keeps them from wandering around trying to produce something that would just be a hindrance. After all, what we need is consumership, not production.

"But that's a relatively minor point, as I said earlier," Long concluded looking at me with a superior air. "It's such a minor point, it won't even bear discussion."

HIS manner, underneath the slick facade, implied that he wouldn't deign to discuss it with two peasants like Blik and me under any circumstances.

"Just a minute " I said. "It's not a minor point at all. It seems to me that you've hit the core of the problem."

"A minor point," insisted Long, his eyes blazing, although his face retained the mask of the smiling salesman.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear," I said. "Have you ever stopped to think that if you take EL into the larger picture, it does serve a purpose, and perhaps we are all here for a different reason than I had originally discussed? Maybe the thing to be is a super-consumer — maybe definitive consumership is the most vital thing in our life, not the production of things."

"Well, that's an idea, sure enough," said Blik suddenly. He had been silent during the flare-up between Long and me. "But I can't help but think," he continued, "that your original argument was a little tighter. The old virtues *do* have a place, don't they?"

You see how slick, how well-

trained, how cunning they were? When Blik opened his mouth, the bubble burst, and I knew that they had neatly switched me around to where I was arguing against myself. Up until the instant Blik started talking, I was actually selling myself on EL, and the truth was that I had almost completed the job by that time. If he had remained silent, I probably would have signed the contract — I think I would have fought to sign it.

I felt an emotion of strength and power then. A top EL team had given me the works and I had seen through them. They still didn't know they had lost, but they would — just as soon as I opened my mouth to speak. The emotion of victory is sweeter than almost anything else, and all the sweeter for having skirted defeat.

"You know, Arnie," I said, "I agree with you. The old virtues are best. I think EL is a living hell."

It was a sight to see, believe me. Their slick, slick faces folded like paper houses in a hurricane. Blik's hands were shaking as he bent over and started packing up the Sim without another word. You have to be good to know that fast that you have lost irrevocably.

They got up then and scooped their hats up from the floor and put them on. The gracious, gentlemanly conduct was a thing of the past.

"Tell me," said Long, his hand on the door, the edge of the EL contract peeking untidily out of his expensive briefcase, "where did we make our mistake?"

I laughed a good loud whoop. It felt good. "It was when Arnie here switched sides."

"Stupid fool," said Long, looking as though he wanted to slam the square box containing the Sim over Blik's head.

"Sorry, old man," Blik said, coloring a deep red. "I'll try to make it up next time."

"Not with me, you won't," said Long. "Technician!"

They opened the door and went out. I jiggled with glee as I looked out the window and watched them cross the court. Long was walking along in a high dudgeon, his briefcase swinging angrily with every step. Blik was trotting along to one side and behind him, his shoulders slumped, defeat written all over his form and walk.

I LOOKED around as the wall swung open and Rommy walked in with his hand outstretched.

"Congratulations!" he said, beaming widely. "It was perfect! My God, it's a delight for a director to work with a real group of competent actors. All three of you were perfect!"

"Thanks," I said. "I hope I was

as good as you think when we play the tape back." I felt along the base of my skull where the transmitter hung encased in Natur-flesh and covered with fake hair. I could hardly believe it was there, it felt so natural.

Rommy looked out the window. Long and Blik were walking back through the gate, talking and waving their arms the way people do when they're excited about doing a good job.

"There's a pair of sweethearts," said Rommy. "Real actors, those boys. I checked out the transmission right up to the last minute and they really gave out — you couldn't find a quiver of disbelief or strain. They *felt* it."

"So did I," I said, sitting down and putting my feet up on a low table on the set. "Tell me, Rommy, what in hell is EL going to use these tapes for, anyway? It seems to me it would be sort of dangerous to put all this on tape."

"We couldn't tell you before because it might have spoiled your reactions, but we have a lot of EL subscribers who are down deep opposed to EL, and this tape will be sort of a catharsis for them. It'll give them a real jolt."

"Oh, producer types who are struggling to become consumer types," I said. "They'll experience the role I just got through playing, and it will make them feel they didn't sign the contract, huh?"

"There's more to it than that," said Rommy. "There are some people who just like to experience an extremely strong sales-resistant emotion, mostly because they're pushovers. We wouldn't make a tape like this just for the anti-EL jerks. It's too expensive."

"Tell me," I said, "what are you using Long and Blik for? I thought I detected transmitters on them, too."

"Just the opposite from what you were doing. Some people like to experience a setback or even a complete failure now and then. Sort of an opposite to the 'high' tapes. Lord knows we got hun-

dreds of 'high' tapes, but not many low ones, so we're starting to build a library of them now. A lot of subscribers are getting tired of winning all the time and they'd like to experience a defeat or two once in a while just for the contrast."

Long and Blik came in the door without knocking.

Rommy was on his feet in an instant. "Boys," he shouted, "you were great! I checked the tapes and nobody could be lower than you guys walking out across that court. It was sensational. Probably the best thing that's ever been done here at EL Studios!"

— CON BLOMBERG





The Undetected

By GEORGE O. SMITH

Nothing can possibly be more baffling than a crime in a sealed room . . . but what if the investigator happens to have an open mind?

Illustrated by FINLAY

I

I TOOK a quick look around the apartment, even though I already knew what I had to know.

Gordon Andrews had been slain in his sleep by the quick thrust of some rapierlike instrument. There was no sign of any struggle. The



wall safe stood with its door open and its contents missing. Every door and window was closed, locked, burglar-bugged, and non-openable from the inside; the front door had been forced by the police. Furthermore, it had been raining in wind-whipped torrents for hours, yet there was no trace of moisture on any of the floors.

Of course no one had heard a sound, and naturally there were no fingerprints.

Police Chief Weston spied me and snapped, "What do you make of it, Schnell?"

I shrugged and said, "Completely sealed room."

"Got any ideas?" he demanded.

I had a lot of ideas, but I was not going to express myself without a lot of stark evidence. I do not yearn to have the prefix "ex-" installed in front of my title of Captain of Detectives. I'm much too young to be retired. So instead of trying to explain, I said, "The *modus operandi* is —"

Chief Weston snorted, "Schnell, there isn't a clue in the whole damned building, and yet you stand there and yap about *modus operandi*?"

"That's the point, Chief. The cluelessness is itself the *modus operandi* that points to —"

"You talk as if we had a whole file of unsolved, clueless, sealed-room homicides!"

"Chief," I said, "a true 'perfect

crime' would be one in which no clue existed, including the fact of the crime itself — except those clues that were deliberately planned by the perpetrator for some purpose of his own."

HE glowered at me. "What are you driving at, Schnell?"

"I'm trying to convince you that we are faced with a very clever criminal mind," I said. "A man with a fine talent. One who plans his crimes so well that they aren't even recognized as criminal."

"Nonsense. You can't conceal any crime forever."

"Forever isn't necessary, Chief. Just long enough to cover up completely, to remove all connection. We don't know how many bank tellers have been running on reduced salary because they somehow paid out a hundred in cashing a ten-dollar check. We couldn't demand an audit of all the big financial accounts in town, to know the why and wherefore of the transfer of any sum of money larger than the limit of petty larceny."

"But now you are talking about a sly, clever operator, Schnell. This is a plain case of homicide and burglary."

Plain? Was he kidding himself?

I smiled crookedly. "Chief, there is no doubt in my mind that our crook intended to clean out Gordon Andrews' safe without disturbing a soul. But the imminent

awakening of Andrews presented a physical threat that had to be silenced immediately."

"So that is the work of your sly thief?"

"Chief, just remember that Gordon Andrews was an eccentric old sourpuss who hated to do business with bankers. Now let's suppose that Andrews had awakened in the morning to find his safe cleaned out. He screeches for the cops. We come a-roaring in with the fingerprint detail and the safe specialists and the break-in experts. We find," I said with a wave of my hand, "everything just as we found it here and now. So we look Gordon Andrews in the eye and tell him that no one *could* get in, no one *had* gotten in, and that we suspect him of cleaning out his own safe and yelling 'Copper' to make trouble for the Mayor and the Commissioner, who refused to appoint him a special detail of city employees for bodyguards last year."

"Go on, Schnell," said Chief Weston with deadly patience.

"The homicide was a spur-of-the-moment necessity. Had it been planned, the crook would have plugged Andrews with the old man's personal Banker's Special, which he kept on the bedside table, and made it look like suicide."

"Know a lot about Andrews, don't you, Schnell?"

"What do you mean, Chief?"

"About the Banker's Special."

"I have an excellent memory," I said. "Andrews had a license for the thing. The serial number is 233,467,819 and the gun and license were acquired on August seventh, 1951."

THE Chief sarcastically grunted, "Has it been fired since?"

"It was fired six times at the date of delivery by the police laboratory for the land-mark records," I said.

"Let's not try being funny, Schnell. This is a serious business. Andrews was an eccentric old curmudgeon, but he was also a philanthropist, and the papers will be after our throats if we don't come up with this super-criminal."

"He's going to be damned tough, Chief."

"Okay, this is your project. Nothing else matters until he's caught and convicted — of homicide committed during the course of grand robbery, meaning automatic hot seat."

I nodded slowly.

"Just remember, Schnell — the whole department's behind you," Chief Weston assured me.

I continued to nod, but his assurance didn't reassure me in the least. With about ninety-eight per cent of the general public still not quite willing to accept rockets, missiles and space travel, I had a fat chance of convincing anybody that a telepath had kept guard over the slumbering mind of Gordon Andrews,

while a perceptive solved the combination to the wall safe, so that a kinematic could twirl the dial; that the imminent awakening of Gordon Andrews had indeed been an imminent physical threat to a delicate extra-sensory undertaking, and that therefore he had been silenced by the kinematic, with a weapon located by the perceptive, after warning from the telepath; after which the crime had continued, with the loot being floated by a levitator along a freeway explored by the perceptive and scouted by the telepath and cleared of barriers by the kinematic who opened and debugged them as he went along — and that the real topper for this whopper was that this operation was not the integrated effort of a clever gang of extra-sensory specialists, but rather the single-handed accomplishment of one highly talented Psi-man!

A Psi-man ruthless enough to kill before he would permit his victim to watch the turning dial, the floating loot, the opening portal, simply because there stood a probability that one of the two billion persons on Earth might suspect the phenomena as parapsychical activity, instead of the hallucinatory ravings of a rich old eccentric who hated the incumbent political party!

How best to keep a secret?

Let no one suspect that any secret exists!

II

THE rain was still coming down in wind-whipped torrents that slatted along the avenue in drenching sheets. Huddled in the scant cover of the apartment door was a girl of about eighteen. The rain-coat she wore was no protection; the wind drove the rain up under it. Womanlike, she was struggling with the ruins of a fashionable little umbrella instead of abandoning it for the tangled mess that it was.

She looked at me as I opened the door. She was without guile. She was wet and miserable and determined to take whatever help was proffered, and hope afterward that no unfair advantage would be taken of the situation.

I showed her my I.D. card and she read: "Howard Schnell, Captain, Special Detail." Her face changed from cautious immobility to a sort of wet animation, and she added as if it were important under the circumstances to be completely open, "I'm Florence Wood."

I took the ruined umbrella from her unresisting hand and stood it in the foyer for the janitor to dispose of, and pointed out across the rain-ponded sidewalk to the police car. It was almost high noon, but the rain was so heavy that the identity of the car was by no means conspicuous from the apartment door. Florence Wood nodded as she caught sight of it.

I said, "Now, I'll make a run for it and open the door, and get in first so that I'll be on the driver's side. As soon as I'm out of your way, just dive in and don't worry about closing the door until you're out of this rain. Catch?"

She nodded.

"I'd play Sir Galahad and give you my foul-weather gear to wear," I said, "but you're already so wet that it wouldn't do more than keep the water in."

She smiled at me understandingly.

Then she looked at me with curiosity because I was standing there waiting instead of making my dash immediately. I thought of how my Psi-man could have floated the loot out of an open window and kept the rain from soaking the floor at the same time.

So, to make conversation, I said, "I'm waiting until my will power builds up enough to overcome the forces of gravity, barometric pressure, and the rest of whatever goes into the making of a howling downpour like this. Considering that nature is dissipating energy equal to a couple of hundred atom bombs per second, it takes a bit of time to collect the necessary amount of mental power."

Florence Wood laughed. In mere instants she'd changed from weather-drenched misery to a cheerful sort of discomfort no worse than many a human has endured

for hours at a football game. She said with amusement, "Captain Schnell, why don't you start the car and drive it over here? Seems to me it would take less power than stopping this storm."

"The law says that it is considered unlawful to operate a motor vehicle from any position other than the driver's seat," I replied.

WHEN the slack in the storm I'd been anticipating finally arrived, I took advantage of it to make my run across the sidewalk. Miss Wood followed: her timing was perfect. Everything happened in a continuous sequence without a stoppage at any point. The door opened and I went in, landing hard and bouncing deliberately on the seat springs to hunch myself over; Miss Wood landed and whirled in a flurry of wet skirt and clammy raincoat, hauling one rain-booted ankle out of the way as the door swung closed with a solid and satisfying *thunk*.

I started the car and let the engine idle to warm it up and dry it off. Then I said, "Part of my duty to the citizen includes protection of his health and comfort as well as protection from unlawful behavior. So, where do you wish to be taken?"

She regarded me out of clear gray eyes. "Don't you know?" she asked with a quirk at the corner of her mouth.

"Do I look like a mind reader?"

"Well, you did slow down the storm."

I laughed. "Miss Wood, King Canute would have been a hero instead of a bum if he'd waited until high water before he told the tide to stop. Now, what gave you any reason to suppose that I am endowed with special talents?"

"Well," she said, fumbling through her handbag for the comb, which naturally was at the bottom, "you did come along when I needed help, and you did identify yourself when I so much wanted to know —"

"And since I also remembered that storms as violent as this always have lulls, you put two and two together? Well, it doesn't require telepathy to conclude that you are soaked to the skin, that you need and want help, and that you'd prefer to know just whom you are driving off in a car with. Any other ideas about my talents?"

"Well, I should think —"

"Address first, Miss Wood."

She gave me an address in a residential district that was the maximum distance one could get from City Hall and still enjoy the privilege of paying city taxes. I started the car and headed in that direction. Then I said, "Now, Miss Wood, let's go on with your little fancy."

"Fancy?"

"You've been moonbeaming

about a little courtroom drama where twelve good telepaths and true are reading the mental testimony of a witness who had located some vital bit of evidence by perception and brought it to light by kinematic power."

"Well, it does seem that any truly gifted person would work for the good of humanity."

"I doubt that being gifted with a sense of perception would automatically endow a man with a sense of honor."

"But doesn't it seem just *awful* to think of anything as miraculous as telepathy being used for — for —"

She was trying to avoid the word "immoral" because she was of an age and experience that felt sensitive about its use. Unfortunately the only substitute was the word "sin."

I came to her rescue. "It's deplorable but true that nothing was ever developed for the benefit of mankind without a few sharpshooters quickly figuring out some way to make it pay them a dishonest buck."

"But it would be frightfully hard to bamboozle a telepathic policeman, wouldn't it?" she asked hopefully.

I THOUGHT of my PSI-man, whose only mistake in the sealed room murder of Gordon Andrews had been in being so good

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Sign Card _____

that he'd actually disclosed the existence of a criminal who employed Psi faculties.

"Wouldn't that depend upon whether the policeman or the criminal was the more talented?" I parried. "But that supposes that the police force would have a corps of Psi policemen."

"Wouldn't they?"

"Honey-chile," I said, "at the first thin hint that the Commissioner was even interested in the possibility of hiring someone who knew what the term 'parapsychic phenomena' really meant, there would be a universal howl against 'Thought Police' so loud that it would shatter the polar icecaps."

"But why?" she asked, bewildered.

"They'd start screaming about 'invasion of privacy,' and cite the Bill of Rights, and that would be that."

"You mean that the law has laws against telepathy?"

"No, it doesn't say anything about telepathy," I admitted, knowing what was to come next.

"Well, then?"

"Don't sound so superior, Miss Wood. At the first attempt, the law would discover that it had a hell of a lot to say about telepathy and perception, since they'd definitely affect the interpretation of the Fourth and Fifth Amendments."

"I know the Fifth," she said, "but how about the Fourth?"

"Unreasonable and unwarranted search," I told her.

"But isn't a man guilty when he's guilty?"

"I wish it were as simple as that."

"But why isn't it?"

"Little Miss Wood, you are now asking me to solve an ethical question that's been unanswered for more than ten thousand years." I smiled wistfully. "I am not — repeat not — big enough to answer the following question: 'Shall a killer in the confessional, who has been given absolution by his God, subsequently be punished by his fellow man?'"

"But what has that to do with it?"

"Let's have you answer one: 'Could you truly bare your secret soul to God if you suspected that some prying human being was taking it all down on a tape recorder?'"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then our 'Thought Police' would be standing as a human barrier between any man and his God."

"I suppose so — but couldn't I tell?"

"Tell?"

"Tell whether someone was listening to my thoughts?"

That was another stumper. Does the sign wear out any faster if it's read? Can the radio transmitter be measured to tell whether the broadcast has any audience? Does the tree that falls in the forest barren

of animal life generate the same wave-motion as it would if all the leaves were replaced by active eardrums? There are lots of analogs, but are any of them valid?

I said, "If I cry out, how can I know whether I am being heard?"

And in my mind I made my own reply. I thought in deep concentration: "*How do you read me, Psi-man?*"

The response was zero-zero. And it meant—nothing. My Psi-man could have been following my every thought from the moment that my ringing telephone summoned me to Gordon Andrews' apartment to the present instant, so far as I could tell. There was no feeling of intrusion, no feeling of presence.

III

FLORENCE Wood giggled. "Going to stop the rain again, Captain Schnell?"

The storm was still howling. In the near suburbs, the rain came in more gracefully draped sheets and the wind was not whirlpooled by the fluelike canyons between the buildings, but residential rainwater is just as wet per cubic centimeter as the metropolitan variety.

"Maybe I should drive up over the lawn," I suggested.

"Daddy would blow a fuse."

"We might wait for it to let up."

"I'd rather not," she said sober-

ly. "It's one thing to be driven home in a strange car during a cloudburst, but it's something else to sit out here making it look as if I were paying off by making out."

It came as a pleasant surprise that she did not consider me a superannuated gaffer, and it was her youth that allowed her to discuss parapsychic phenomena without the tongue-in-cheek attitude of the older know-it-alls. I considered Florence Wood and realized that she was at least old enough so that I wouldn't be juggled for cradle-robbing so long as I had a parental acceptance. And I did want someone to talk out the business of psionics without having someone wind me in a sheet and ship me to a shrinker.

And so I said, "If it will smooth things a bit, I'll umbrella you to the door and make official explanation to the stern and anxious parent."

"That we'll enjoy," she giggled. "Daddy always says that he doesn't have to be a mind reader to advise against what my boy friends have in mind. It'll be fun to face him with a — policeman."

Darkly, I said, "Most folks don't look upon me as the fun-loving type. Policemen aren't always welcome, you know."

"Oh, Daddy will enjoy it. He writes a bit. He'll never be another Ellery Queen, but he will enjoy talking to a real live captain of detectives."

At this point a lot of favorable things took place at once, such as the arrival of another convenient letup in the storm, the mad rush and the ringing of the doorbell, the opening of the door and some gasped introductions as we stood in a little hallway dripping puddles of rainwater on a small rug.

"Police Captain—?"

"Howard Schnell."

"But Florence isn't—?"

I laughed at Mrs. Wood. "Not at all. This is just the rescue of a very wet maiden in distress. When we're not shooting bank robbers, we also help little old ladies — and lovely young girls — across streets. All in the day's work, you know."

Mrs. Wood hauled Florence off, saying something about hot showers and dry clothing, while Mr. Wood regarded me with interest.

HE beat all the way around the bush, trying to ascertain without actually asking pointblank whether I could spend a few moments, and, if so, would I like a drink.

One must not anticipate, so I waited until he'd made his meaning clear. Then I accepted his offer of some bourbon, refused his offer of a cigar and settled myself into the chair he waved at.

I tasted the highball, smiled in approval, and opened the conversation by saying, "Your daughter tells me that you write, Mr. Wood."

He smiled wistfully. "Well, I'm not at the stage where the mere announcement that I am working on a novel causes an immediate pre-publication sale of seventy thousand copies. You see, I'm still trying to work out a good association gimmick."

"A what?"

"An association gimmick. The name Erle Stanley Gardner, for instance, always means a story about Perry Mason and the inevitable courtroom scene full of legal fireworks. Rex Stout has his Nero Wolf, the fabulous detective who lets his secretary do all the work."

"And," I added, "John Dickson Carr writes about Gideon Fell, who is an expert at solving sealed-room mysteries."

"Exactly!" he said. "I've a series of gimmicks all planned, but I really need a strong, out-of-the-ordinary character to go along with them. You see, I propose to write a series of stories about 'perfect crimes.'"

"I'm not smart," I said. "I've always assumed that the so-called 'perfect crime' would be one in which the criminal walks off scot-free with the loot under one arm and the girl on the other."

He said, "From your point of view, a true 'perfect crime' would be one in which no clue existed, including the fact of the crime itself — except those clues that were deliberately planned by the perpetra-

tor for some purpose of his own. That is your own angle, isn't it?"

I nodded. Indeed it was, and it had been expressed in precisely the same words that I had used in speaking to Chief Weston.

"However," he went on blandly, "you'll agree that a clue is usually the result of a mistake, or failure to plan completely, or the result of some accidental circumstance."

"Right."

"But in a 'perfect crime' there would be no error, no mistake."

"Yes, but aren't you backing yourself into a hole that you've lined with fish hooks yourself?"

"Not at all," he replied. "Clues must be cleverly contrived, created, and established in such a way that the episode is ultimately known to be crime and not labeled misadventure, suicide, or the like. Otherwise," he said with a genial smile, "we're writing about a 'perfectly justifiable homicide' instead of a 'perfect crime.'"

I nodded again.

"And, of course," he finished, "these clues must also provide precisely the correct amount of information so that the motive of the criminal is not only fulfilled, but exposed — if not to one of the characters in the book, at least to the reader."

MR. Wood relaxed and sipped his own drink. From somewhere aloft, a number of individ-

ually insignificant traces added up to fairly reliable evidence that Florence and Mrs. Wood were about to return. I gathered that the cross-questioning had allayed any parental suspicion.

I said, "One thing you haven't mentioned," and paused for effect. "To the Hindu, 'perfection' means the inclusion of an almost imperceptible flaw so that its maker cannot be accused of presuming to be as good as God. Is your 'perfect crime' to be perfect in the eyes of the criminal, or in the eyes of the police?"

He said, "Ah, Captain Schnell, that is indeed one of my bothersome problems."

Mrs. Wood came into the room, followed by Florence. The girl had lost the soaked-gamin look. She was transformed by modern alchemy into a poised young woman who forced me to revise my estimated eighteen several years upward. She nodded affably at her father, smiled at me and then came over because she noticed that my high-ball glass was empty.

I thanked her, and she smiled wide and bright as she asked, "Has Daddy been giving you the details of his impossible bandit?"

"Well, in a way."

Mr. Wood said, "I'm sort of like the standard television father — incapable of adding two and two without the close supervision of the female members of my family."

"I — that is, we — keep telling Daddy he should hire Superman for a hero."

"You've changed," chuckled Mr. Wood.

"Changed?"

"Yesterday you advocated that I hire a detective with telepathy and a sense of perception."

"We discussed it on the way home," said Florence.

"Superman?" I asked.

"No, this extra-sensory business," said Florence

Mr. Wood inquired, "Are you interested in parapsychology, Captain Schnell?"

"I've been interested in the subject for a good many years," I answered.

"Would the public accept it, I wonder," he mused.

Mrs. Wood said, "A lot of people read psychic books."

Mr. Wood said plaintively, "I don't want to write psychic books. I want to write whodunits. But it would solve my problem, wouldn't it? My series would consist of crimes that would be perfect, except for the introduction of a Master of Psionics who tells the story in the first person singular, and who solves the crime by parapsychic power."

"It might read better if you made your extra-sensory character the criminal," I suggested.

He shook his head. "Wouldn't do at all. A criminal with extra-sen-

sory talent would always win out over the police. There have been only a very few successful stories written in which the criminal got away."

"Maybe he wouldn't," I said.

"But how could he possibly fail?"

"He might get sloppy."

"Sloppy! Mind reading every anticipated move?"

"Or bored."

"Bored!"

"One often leads to the other," I told him with a smile. "Which is just my policeman's way of thinking. From the policeman's point of view, you're overlooking one rather important angle."

"Indeed? Well, you must tell me all about it."

"O KAY," I said. "My point is that you should not view this as a single incident in the life of an extra-sensory who has turned his talent to crime, but rather take the overall view. For instance, we can write the life history of our Psi-man in broad terms. As a schoolboy, he was considered extraordinarily lucky at games of chance and skilled in games of manual dexterity; he stood high in schoolwork and at the same time managed to do it without working very hard. By the time he enters high school, he realizes that his success is due to some sort of 'sensing' of when things will be right. This increases the efficiency of his

talent and he surges forward and would have become top-of-class if he hadn't discovered that brilliance in recitation made up for a lack of handed-in homework.

"In other words, nothing stands as a real challenge to him. His talents surmount the obstacles that confront his fellow man. He could collect corporations or be a labor leader, President or bum. Anything he wants can be gotten without much fuss. Our Psi-man is primarily interested in a statistical income sufficient to support him to the dictates of his ambition. The trick is to achieve, say, twenty grand per annum, in such a way that the manipulation is never discovered.

"At first our Psi-man plans meticulously. But soon this process seems unnecessary because the poor ignorant homo saps don't even know they're being conned. He has no hard surface against which to whet his nervous edge, and so he begins to play games. He leaves clues, at first to ascertain the true level of his fellow man's intelligence and ability. Next he leaves conflicting clues to see which way the poor dopes will jump. In a world that scoffs at parapsychic phenomena, he leaves clues to support the theory that only an extra-sensory criminal could have done the dastardly deed. Will one of the ignorant apes recognize the truth? If he does, will he be in a high position, or will he be one of the dili-

gent ones who fetch coffee for the guy in the upper office? If the work of a Psi-man is recognized, how will our bright policeman go about it, and what will he do with the evidence after it's been shown to him?

"And so, Mr. Wood, our Psi-man criminal has become bored because there is no one in the world to challenge him, and he gets sloppy through his growing contempt for the antlike activities of his fellow creatures. At last he shows himself, deliberately taunting them to take action against him. And that," I concluded, with a nod at him, "might be the 'perfect crime' in which your extra-sensory criminal finally exposes himself."

"But why," Mrs. Wood asked in perplexity, "would such a talented person turn to crime—or do you think that all extra-sensory people—"

I turned to smile at her. "Mrs. Wood, I was not speaking of extra-sensory people as a statistical body. I was referring to one particular character."

"I find him hard to believe in."

"On the contrary, my dear," said Mr. Wood, "Captain Schnell has drawn an amazingly accurate thumbnail sketch of our Psi-man, and I daresay that he could go on and on, filling in more minute details."

"Oh, yes, indeed," I said. "But I must leave it up to the professional

writer to tell what the brilliant policeman does when he recognizes the work as that of an extra-sensory. For instance, does he become bold enough to mention it to Chief Weston, or to Commissioner Stone? Or will he confine his discussion to the company of a rain-soaked young woman so circumstantially available and coincidentally willing to discuss Psionics?"

"Captain Schnell," breathed Florence Wood, "what on Earth are you talking about?"

"Your father," I said.

Mr. Wood stepped into the breach. "Captain Schnell was dramatizing for your benefit, I'm sure. Because Captain Schnell knows very well how impossible it is to surprise a telepath into revealing himself."

Florence Wood's expression changed to a mildly bothered smile. "It certainly sounded as if he were accusing you of something."

"You mean — like — *mind reading*?" he asked with a big belly laugh that closed the subject.

IV

BY most of the rules of society, both Mr. Wood and I were guilty of gross gentility. He greeted me overtly as the welcome guest and needled me with a show of patronizing tolerance as he implied that my basic interest was in Florence.

To match him, I accepted his hospitality and made use of the proximity to spy on him and his family.

There are ways and means of making a pretended deaf-mute reveal himself — the human being does not live who will not leap half-way out of his skin at the shock of an unexpected revolver shot, no matter how well trained he is at feigning deafness.

As for surprising a telepath, I knew it wouldn't work, but I had to try it anyway. I put both Mrs. Wood and Florence through a number of mental hurdles. To this, Mr. Wood took a quietly tolerant attitude. He understood and was prepared to accept as healthily normal a certain amount of lust and carnal conjecture in the minds of males who were interested in his daughter. He forgave me for mentally insulting his wife because he knew that my mental peregrinations were only aimed at determining whether his wife was telepathic. Finally he came out flatly and told me to stop wasting my effort, because neither Florence nor Mrs. Wood had a trace of extra-sensory power. Their lack of shocked or outraged response was not a case of the well-trained telepath divining my intention and planning a blank response.

Furthermore, Mr. Wood asserted that neither of them knew of his extra-sensory faculty, that he

fully intended to keep it that way, and that I should know damned well that such stunts wouldn't work in the first place.

And so I continued to enjoy a dinner now and then, and occasionally the company of Florence.

Ultimately the lack of progress brought Chief Weston's nervous system to the blowup point. He called me in and I went, knowing that trouble cannot always be avoided, and when it can't, it's just plain sense to kick out the props and have done with it.

He plowed right in: "And what in hell have you been doing?"

"Chief, I've been—"

"You put a make-team on some half-baked writer named Wood."

"Edward Hazlett—"

"Because," he yelled, "the first person you saw when you stuck your nose outside of Gordon Andrews' apartment was Florence Wood!"

"Well, Chief, you see—"

"You perhaps suspected that she'd just walked through the wall of that apartment? And naturally you pulled out your hip-pocket crime laboratory and checked that umbrella tip for bloodstains before you threw it aside."

"Well, you see—"

"Schnell, would you have been so damned gallant if she'd been an ugly old hag in a ratty dress carrying a dead halibut wrapped in an old newspaper?"

"But you see—"

"So you leap into gallant action, and after you've rescued the fair maiden from her watery grave, you suddenly find it desirable to use a department automobile to deliver the damsel home."

"But—"

"Schnell, I'll bet that Wood girl wasn't any wetter than you were. And that's how you put the long arm of coincidence to work?"

IT was more than coincidence. Florence Wood had been in that soaking rain and whipping wind for more than an hour. Any housewife would have corroborated my statement that only a prolonged soaking can achieve a truly wet-through-the-seams condition. Oh, Daddy Wood was just the guy to think of a stunt like saturating the seams and fibers of his daughter's clothing by agitating the water supersonically at high amplitude, but, let's face it, that would have beaten hell out of her soft white skin.

As for the umbrella, the wound could indeed have been made by a rapierlike thrust. But a comparison between the depth of the wound and the length of the tip showed that the bottom of the wound could not have been reached without forcing part of the umbrella itself into the victim's body. The face of the wound showed no such outsize penetra-

tion, hence the umbrella was not the sought-for weapon.

At this point, Chief Weston's telephone interrupted him and he snatched it up, bellowed his name, and then listened. Finally he snarled that it was for me and fairly hurled the handset at me.

I caught it at the end of its cord and said: "Captain Schnell, Special Detail—"

"Oh, I know it is you, Captain Schnell," said the suave voice of Edward Hazlett Wood. "I just wanted to tell you that your analysis of the umbrella's uselessness as evidence was quite brilliant. Also your logic in the matter of my daughter's rain-soaked clothing was clever. I really don't regret the chewing out you are getting. You deserve it. I was hoping to find you bright enough to avoid it. Anyway, can we expect you for dinner this evening?"

"Yes," I snapped, and hung up, thinking a few things that would have called for a terse reprimand about foul and abusive language if telepathy were administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

"Wood?" snapped Chief Weston.

"Yes."

"Date?" he snarled.

I groaned. Wood did have the nasty telepath's ability to maneuver me into a situation that I could not conveniently avoid.

"When they start calling the of-

fice to pester you for dates —"

"I know what I'm doing!"

"So do I!" he yelled. "You're doing nothing!"

"Listen, Chief, I'll admit the long arm of coincidence, but you'll have to admit that when there's trouble, I'm usually the first one to smell it."

"So how do you connect them up?"

"Chief, I walk out of that apartment with your own words ringing in my ears. 'Looks like the classical setup for a "perfect crime,"' you said. And then I meet this girl who just happens to have a father who writes whodunits and is planning a series of books based upon the 'perfect crime.'"

"Maybe," sneered Chief Weston, "the guy is a mind reader."

"I've given even that some consideration."

"So I hear tell."

"Any objections?" I asked.

"**O**BJECTIONS? I've got a lot of objections!" he howled. "This is a police department, not a soothsayers' convention! We're subject to enough criticism as it is. You needn't have added the act that makes us look like a bunch of damned fools."

"But, Chief, I—"

"So what do I hear tell?" He hauled the tray drawer of his desk open and pulled out one of the tabloids, opened to one of its hate-

everything columnists. "Listen! 'In recent years the legality of the famous witchcraft trials of the past has been subject to debate, with the result that these past convictions have now been declared "mis-carriages of justice." Posthumously, I must unhappily add. However, there has been little or no amendment to the laws against witchcraft, wizardry, charms, amulets and spells.

"But brace yourselves, citizens. One of our younger and more brilliant captains of detectives has shown an interest recently in parapsychics and may be training to track down criminals by the application of extra-sensory detection. If this be true, the laws will have to be ruptured to permit him to secure evidence, since it is a tenet of the law that evidence must be secured through legal methods and processes.

"Fortune Tellers of the World, Arise! You have nothing to lose but your crystal balls!"

Chief Weston slapped the paper down. "What do you think of that?"

I said, "He's just making noise. Telepathy has nothing in common with—"

"I wish I could stop you from even *thinking* about telepathy!"

"If you could," I said calmly, "you'd have to be telepathic to determine when I had violated your dictum — and if you were telepathic, Chief, you'd have been on

my side from the beginning."

He merely glared at me. At this moment I should have been expecting the worst, and prepared to meet it. But please remember that there's always that mental block against prying, especially when the United States mail is concerned. But now Edward Hazlett Wood was about to show me how a real extra-sensory sharpshooter clobbers his enemies.

WESTON'S secretary entered, carrying a package.

I saw it, knew at once what it was, and groaned with despair. The only chance I saw of getting out of this was the forlorn hope that Weston would believe the package was a dig, probably mailed by the sniping columnist.

It was cleverly contrived. The addressee's name had been blurred and half-obliterated so that it couldn't have been quietly dropped on my desk where I could have disposed of its damning contents quietly. It had, of course, come special delivery, urgent, immediate handling. If I were a believer in amulets, witches and spells, I'd have been of the opinion that an *aura* of urgency had been created about the box.

Chief Weston's secretary handed it to him with a mumbled suggestion that it seemed to be important, and perhaps it should be opened in hopes that the contents would con-



vey information as to the identity of the owner.

I said nothing.

INSIDE the package was a fine crystal ball, a set of tarot cards with a thick book of explanations, and a second deck of cards the like of which most people have heard but few have actually seen. These were the square, circle, wiggly line cards used in parapsychic research.

There was the damning evidence of a packing slip with my name clearly printed on it, and a rubber stamp notation that the merchandise order had been accompanied by a prepaid postal note.

The timing was perfect. The problem of keeping that package on schedule all the way from its point of origin to its devastating delivery must have taxed Wood's faculties, but he'd done it.

Chief Weston's choler rose visibly, and in a voice loud enough to be heard in Asbury Park, he yelled: "Schnell, did you — buy — this?"

I was trapped. No matter what I said, it was calculated to get me into trouble. For in the petty cash box in the secretary's desk was a petty cash slip made out in the amount of thirty-nine dollars and seventeen cents for a postal money order payable to the Aladdin Novelty Company of Bayonne, New Jersey. The signature was good enough for me to accept it myself. All along the line it had been nice-

ly legal — or would have been if I'd really signed that petty cash slip.

If it came to an argument, I'd have to perform miracles to prove my innocence.

"Schnell," said Weston in a cold, level voice, "you'll get me a lead on the Gordon Andrews murder by tomorrow night or hand me your badge."

I fumed in silence because there was nothing to say.

"Get out!"

As I closed the door behind me, I heard the crash of the crystal ball hitting the wall. Luckily he hadn't hurled it at the glass panel in his office door.

My own phone was ringing as I approached my desk. I picked it up wearily and said, "Very clever, Mr. Wood. Very damned clever."

He said, "Your basic difficulty, Captain Schnell, is that you have sworn to uphold the law and are compelled to employ legal methods. You must always work within the framework of the law. You would not think of tampering with the United States mails, even to save yourself from an unjust charge."

"Wood, if I make a single move outside of the law, you'll use it against me, won't you?"

"I'm afraid that's the way it has to be. You play according to your rules and I'll play according to mine."

"Well, now, Mr. Wood, in our philosophy there may be strength. Remember, upon the day that the forces of law and order must violate their own concepts in order to effect their own ends, on that day law and order ceases to be the goal of honest men."

"Spoken like an idealist!"

Hanging up a telephone is not polite, but in this case hanging up did not snap the link of communication.

V

AN angry man is a poor fighter. I sat shuffling papers on my desk, half of my intellect raging helplessly. Finally I forced myself to sit and read the papers on the desk, even though I knew every word on every one of them.

One reported that Wood had been one of the less conspicuous partners in a very successful personnel-placement agency. I could have added a penciled note that a telepath should make a very successful personnel manager.

Another said that Florence Wood was employed as a safety deposit vault clerk in the Third National Bank. This didn't bother me. What the standard human gets out of staring at a solid phalanx of safety deposit boxes is a headache, not perceptive-gained information.

There was a medical report that Wood had undergone a mild coro-

nary occlusion some months ago which had hastened his retirement. I wondered whether his retirement had been hastened by a real coronary occlusion or whether he'd used his extra-sensory power to fake the symptoms and control the doctor's instruments.

Among the papers was a complete dissertation on the stab-wound in Gordon Andrews' chest. There was no trace of any foreign body; the wound did not go all the way through the chest cavity. It was not clean cut, as if made by a sharpened weapon, but more like the semi-rounded end of an umbrella or a blunt, heavy spike. In the opinion of the medical examiner, the wound had been made with a rapid thrust, but it looked as if there had been no withdrawal. An inspection of the wound for traces of excess water (icicles) or carbon dioxide (dry ice) had failed to disclose any plausible weapon or projectile that could have evaporated or sublimed out of existence.

I longed to suggest that a test be made for air. If a kinematic can create pyrotic effects by agitation of the molecules in something to be ignited, a good kinematic could make Maxwell's Demon go to work for him. Like compressing a volume of air into a .38 slug and projecting it at revolver velocity.

And in the end I was not leafing the reports or reading them. I was really staring at the wall. Specific-

ally, I was staring at the calendar without paying much attention to it, and as I came out of my reverie I realized that I'd been absorbed in a little red smudge on one of the dates.

Association is a funny process. The combination of calendar and red blob stared at hazily had finally brought my mind around to thinking of February the fourteenth, which honors a patron saint who has absolutely nothing to do with Jimmy Valentine, who was reputed to have been a very fast man with the combination of a safe, especially the type of safe that Gordon Andrews kept his money in because he did not trust banks, which may have been a good idea considering that Florence Wood worked in a bank vault, and her father . . .

I jumped out of my office chair just as it tilted over backward. If I hadn't jumped, I'd have split my skull on the radiator under the window behind me.

A heavy brass-edged ruler came up from the desk and swung in a whistling saber swipe at my face. I ducked in time to let the cut pass over my head; it clipped a few upstanding hairs. When it reached the end of its stroke, I wrested it out of Wood's control just to prove that an alert local force could exert more power than a distant kinematic force. Naturally I could. Leverage, of course.

NEXT came a metal-to-metal clicking sound; it was the police positive in the upper left-hand corner of my desk. I thought strongly, "Psi-man, you lift that gun and fire it at me through the desk drawer, and the angle and everything will be enough evidence to change Weston's opinion from angry rejection of all Psionics to a cold, calculated, vengeful agreement with everything I've suggested."

The clicking stopped coming from the desk drawer and resumed in smaller kind from the little desk lock in the tray drawer of the desk.

These desk locks can be picked with a bent hairpin, but picking takes time. Everything takes *time*. At any rate, it did indeed take Edward Hazlett Wood a finite time to juggle the little brass tumblers, turn the main cylinder, retract the sliding bolt, withdraw the desk tray to unlatch the side drawers, pull open the upper left-hand drawer and extract my police positive from its holster with its mechanism entering the firing cycle — which itself takes *time*.

By which time I'd vacated my office and was starting across the outer office floor in the brisk, stiff-legged walk of a man in a hurry to go a long way fast.

Wood was stalled. I thought: "Make like a poltergeist, Psi-man — and convince everybody that you exist!"

The outer office was a bustle of the usual police activity. But Wood did not have the ability to invade another mind and take over. At least, no one of the men in the office suddenly had a fit of homicidal mania with Captain Schnell listed as the first victim.

And so I made Weston's office and shoved my head in through the outer door and yelled: "Weston — Third National Bank — and make it fast!"

I turned and headed outside as Weston started the usual top-brass routine of wanting to know all of the infinitely variable reasons why he should leave his office at all, let alone right now. With no one to fire delaying questions at, and with a growing realization that he was not going to learn a thing by sitting there in fulmination, he followed.

I paid no more attention to him once I knew he was on his way.

I had my own hands full.

CONSIDERING the general reliability of the average internal combustion engine in the face of neglect, abuse and the natural ravages of weather, the automobile engine is a brute-force mechanism completely unable to support a psychosis. I was, however, appalled to discover just how many little thumb-valves, levers, wires, doodads, cams, gizmos and kadodies there are, each of which must be adjusted within ridiculously narrow

limits before the so-called brute-force mechanism will deign to turn a gear. But again, and luckily, making adjustments and maladjustments takes time. And by the logical rules of classical mechanics, the simple maladjusting turn of a screw valve takes no longer to return to adjustment provided the restorer is as bright and as quick as the wrecker.

We worked our way through it like a pair of fencers or ju jitsu professionals going through the formal ritual of opening their engagement.

He fastened on the starting system, but I licked him cold on that one because the ignition key controls the starter relay switch and I could handle both with one hand.

He tried to block the starting relay, but the armature had started before he arrived with his kinematic barrier and the solid mechanico-electrical power carried the armature home.

He made a futile attempt to flummox up the laws of Mr. Ohm, but he did not have the power to prevent amperes from flowing from the battery into the starting motor. By the time he thought of gumming up the bendix, the gear had meshed against the flywheel and the engine was turning over.

He tried to flood the engine, but I held the choke valve just as I wanted it. He fiddled with the breaker-points and I blocked that

until one of the cylinders fired. That kicked the whole engine into life and made the engine far too rapid to control, moving member by moving member. This caused his attention to turn to the needle valves, but as fast as he turned them out, I turned them back in again. He hit the choke again and I parried his thrust.

The engine kicked over, caught, spluttered and backfired, and then went into an erratic running that smoothed out slightly as it warmed. I wasted no time; I kicked her into gear and took off in a jack-rabbit start with my siren wailing.

Exultantly, I thought: "Can you hit a moving target, Psi-man?"

Yes, you can stop an internal combustion engine turning at three thousand revolutions per minute by yanking off the ignition system. But not when your opponent is doing everything in his power to prevent you, and not when both of you are traveling at sixty or more miles per hour and you have a rougher driving course than he.

MY own siren was clearing my way, driving motorists to the shelter of the side streets and parking places, and causing my fellow policemen to take charge blocks ahead to clear the path for the vehicle that had the right to exceed the city speed limit. My worthy opponent drove at sixty miles per hour at his own risk, trying to race

me to the Third National Bank.

Wood's extra-sensory driving was no better than mine. The traffic pattern was clear to both of us. But who should know better than a policeman what the average motorist will do in the face of an emergency?

He took the time now and then to hurl something at me, but this was not very effective. If you think not, figure how many things you can see and use as weapons while driving at sixty.

And, too, he was also fighting the unfavorable end of a missile-problem called "terminal control," which simply states that any guided missile approaching its target is subject to greater and greater interference by the enemy as it gets closer. Wood's near-misses I ignored with a disdain calculated to make him furious, and his near-hits I blocked with an ease that proved my ability to outguess and outmaneuver him.

I chuckled to myself, for Edward Hazlett Wood had been played off-balance. He'd committed the hysterical mistake of fighting me on my ground instead of his. He had thrust and I'd parried and advanced, forcing him to thrust again before he could recover. He'd been fighting in the very odd position of conducting a vigorous offensive while back-stepping in inexorable retreat. He should have run and run until he was clear enough to

prepare a single telling blow.

And so ultimately I came to the front of the Third National Bank in a screeching halt. I stepped under a falling cornice, neatly avoided a revolving door that tried to slice me, and side-stepped the bronze bust of Salmon P. Chase that topped from its niche of honor above the door. I evaded the erratic rolling of a pencil, and I trod with unerring step on a circular patch of invisible stuff that was as slippery as the proverbial frictionless lubricant. The slick flowed forward and down over the stairs as I hurried below; I held myself erect above it by sheer will power.

As I strode toward the safe-deposit vault, I thought exultantly: "You're outpointed, Psi-man!"

VI

FLORENCE Wood looked up from her little desk and cried, "Why, Captain Schnell! How nice to see you!"

"Hello," I said with a smile. "I hope you won't mind my company for a while."

"I'm not likely to go for a stroll in—Captain Schnell! Don't—"

Seven and one-half tons of finely wrought and polished tool-steel alloy swung on delicately balanced hinges, coming to rest with the metal-to-metal sound of machined surfaces sliding into a perfect fit with its precision-matched recep-

tacle. Its piston-fit made a pressure on our eardrums. Then the automatic switches took over and motors whirled in solid muffled harmony as the massive bars slid out of their nests into the polished slots.

The ponderous operation that sealed the two of us off from the outside world behind a barrier of drill-proof and burglar-proof and blast-proof solidity concluded not with the mechanical fanfare it deserved, but with a gentle little *click* that was as final as the Word of God.

"—do that!" gasped Florence Wood, weakly finishing her admonition.

She stared at me.

The knowledge that this bank vault door was equipped with a time-lock that would not permit it to be opened except in the interval between nine-fifteen and nine-thirty in the morning of any working weekday ceased to be mere information and became vitally important to Florence Wood.

So did the secondary knowledge that the bank vault was also contrived in available volume to limit the breathable air. There was not enough to support the average human adult overnight until opening time tomorrow morning. Now there were two of them entombed in it — *and she was one of them!*

"We'll die!" she screamed.

"Trust me, Florence?"



She looked dubious. She was not at all willing to regard anyone as competent who was so foolish as to lock himself into a bank vault — and her with him.

Florence was still struggling through her sea of mixed thoughts when the telephone rang. It was Chief Weston and he bellowed al-

most loud enough to hear through the yards of concrete and steel that separated us.

"Schnell — what in the bloody hell have you done?"

"I've shut the vault," I said.

"You'll die!"

"I doubt it."

"How do you propose to get



out?" he demanded with heavy sarcasm.

"Just ask Edward Hazlett Wood — the Psi-man in our midst."

"Schnell, if you get out of there alive, I'm going to ask for your resignation."

"If I get out of here alive, you'll need every faculty I have to keep

our Psi-man juggled for good."

"You and your extra-sensory—"

"Chief, get it through your thick skull that I am so convinced I'm right that I am betting my life on it!"

"And can you tell me why he is going to give himself away to rescue you?"

"Because I have his daughter right here beside me."

"Schnell—"

"Stop yacking, Chief. Call me when Wood arrives. I have an emotional problem on my hands down here."

"How do you know Wood's coming?"

"He's been following my every move by telepathy," I said. "And he's been trying to block me all the way. Oh, he knows all right."

THEN I hung up to stop a lot of senseless gab. I turned to Florence, who was just beginning to understand what I had said and what it meant to both her and her father. She stood there with shocked eyes regarding me, and with one hand pressed back against her teeth. She said, "I don't believe it," in a barely audible voice.

"It's true, and I'm sorry it's true," I told her.

"It can't be true."

"That's what you'd like to believe," I said softly. "But the fact remains that your father is a killer."

"I'd rather die."

"Florence, the choice between death and dishonor is not yours to make. Whether you live or die is up to your father, who is guilty of placing you in this awkward position by turning his talents to evil."

She stared at me. "But — how could you — ?"

"There was no other way but to

bait this trap emotionally."

"So cold and cruel—"

I nodded. "So were the pioneers who saved one last bullet for their wives."

How could I tell this hurt girl that I had looked time and again into the minds of killers and found them far worse than the deeds they committed? When the official record states that upon such and such a date, so and so was punished for his crime, how is he punished for the harm he did to those who placed their trust in him? I hate them because they force me to reveal them for what they are, making me an agent of their betrayal.

The phone rang again. "Yeah, Chief?"

"Schnell, Wood's just arrived. What shall I tell him?"

"Don't bother. He knows it all."

"Schnell, granting that you are right, why should he show his hand when he knows — or could easily find out — that the time-lock setting mechanism is on your side of that vault door?"

"Sure it is," I replied. "But it's covered by a sheet of five-ply safety glass."

"Use your revolver!"

"Chief, reprimand me for a violation of regulations if you must, but let me point out that only an idiot would wear a gun when he's pitting himself against a Psi-man."

"Got everything figured out, haven't you, Schnell?"

"Chief," I said, "this affair started in a sealed room, and now it's going to end in one."

I yanked on the telephone and pulled it out of its connection block, snapping that link of communication. Then, to satisfy Edward Hazlett Wood, I hurled the instrument as hard as I could against the safety glass. The telephone bounced as if I had thrown it against six solid feet of battleship plate armor.

I THOUGHT: "*Psi-man, you are trapped!*"

He thought: "*I've killed before, Schnell. Why shouldn't I profess helplessness and innocence, and accuse you and the whole Police Department of the stupid and wanton death of my beloved daughter?*"

"*Because you've erred, Psi-man Wood.*"

"*Ah, now I have proof! You're a Psi-man, too!*"

"*Who — me?*" I thought without a visible change in my expression for Florence Wood to see. "*You're the one who erred, Wood. You neglected the rules.*"

"*Bah — the law! Stupid law—*"

"*Not so stupid, Wood. The law is really very sensible. It's strong, Wood, and it fosters the strength that comes of following it. So you see, Psi-man Wood, by never, never making any overt use of my talent, by never admitting that I know more than any clever man can see*

and deduce from what he knows — it has now become quite obvious to Chief Weston that if any such shenanigans as extra-sensory manipulation of this bank-vault door take place — you're the only one suspected of parapsychic power!"

And then the time-lock setting dials clicked around, their tiny noise muted by the glass door. They came around until they pointed to the present time. Then came the louder manipulation of outside dial lock, the heavy click of massive tumblers, and then the solid turning sound of wheel and mighty lever. The vault door swung open.

Outside, a pale and speechless man faced me, looking at his daughter. Weston was shaking his head, but the confusion was clearing. Weston was a good man, quite willing to operate without a full explanation, so long as there was a reasonable probability that some reasonable explanation would come later. The president and four vice-presidents of the bank stared at their vault door in dismay, wondering how anyone could from now on rely on any protection if the best of the vault-maker's art could be opened with such ease.

And Florence. She started forward with a glad cry, but stopped in mid-stride as she realized the full truth. In those fractions of a second, she became the full, mature adult who had been hurt, and who

knew that hurt and pain are not the end.

She stopped a full yard from him and whispered, "Daddy — you did — it!"

He looked at her out of frantic eyes. "I didn't! I didn't!"

Chief Weston took a pair of handcuffs from one of the uniformed cops and held them up in front of Edward Hazlett Wood's eyes. "Coming quietly, Wood, or must I weld them on you?"

STUNNED, knowing that any move he made I would block, the murderer turned to go.

I was going to have quite an interesting intellectual problem to solve. I was going to have to testify that I was clever enough to trap an extra-sensory criminal without displaying my own extra-sensory talent. It wasn't just a matter of

putting a possible ending to my official usefulness to the forces of law and order if the facts became known. One word of suspicion against Captain Howard Schnell and some clever defense attorney would raise a wholly reasonable doubt as to which Psi-man opened that vault door.

And being sworn to uphold the law, and enforce the law within the framework of the law itself, I'd have to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God!

But, according to the same sensible law, not unless I was specifically asked.

And to answer Edward Hazlett Wood's question: The perfect answer to the perfect crime committed by the perfect criminal is *a perfect retribution.*

— GEORGE O. SMITH

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By PHILIP K. DICK



war game

*Let the aliens get away with one
thing — and they'd get away with
everything — including the Earth!*

Illustrated by WOOD

IN his office at the Terran Import Bureau of Standards, the tall man gathered up the morning's memos from their wire basket, and, seating himself at his desk, arranged them for reading. He put on his iris lenses, lit a cigarette.

"Good morning," the first memo said in its tinny, chattery voice, as Wiseman ran his thumb along the line of pasted tape. Staring off through the open window at the parking lot, he listened to it idly. "Say look, what's wrong with you people down there? We sent that

lot of—" a pause as the speaker, the sales manager of a chain of New York department stores, found his records — "those Ganymedeans toys. You realize we have to get them approved in time for the autumn buying plan, so we can get them stocked for Christmas." Grumbling, the sales manager concluded, "War games are going to be an important item again this year. We intend to buy big."

Wiseman ran his thumb down to the speaker's name and title.

"Joe Hauck," the memo-voice chattered. "Appeley's Children's."

To himself, Wiseman said, "Ah." He put down the memo, got a blank and prepared to reply. And then he said, half-aloud, "Yes, what about that lot of Ganymedeans toys?"

It seemed like a long time that the testing labs had been on them. At least two weeks.

Of course, any Ganymedeans products got special attention these days; the Moons had, during the last year, gotten beyond their usual state of economic greed and had begun — according to intelligence circles — mulling overt military action against competitive interests, of which the Inner Three planets could be called the foremost element. But so far nothing had shown up. Exports remained of adequate quality, with no special jokers, no toxic paint to be licked off, no capsules of bacteria.

And yet . . .

Any group of people as inventive as the Ganymedeans could be expected to show creativity in whatever field they entered. Subversion would be tackled like any other venture — with imagination and a flair for wit.

Wiseman got to his feet and left his office, in the direction of the separate building in which the testing labs operated.

SURROUNDED by half-disassembled consumers' products, Pinario looked up to see his boss, Leon Wiseman, shutting the final door of the lab.

"I'm glad you came down," Pinario said, although actually he was stalling; he knew that he was at least five days behind in his work, and this session was going to mean trouble. "Better put on a prophylaxis suit—don't want to take risks." He spoke pleasantly, but Wiseman's expression remained dour.

"I'm here about those inner-citadel-storming shock troops at six dollars a set," Wiseman said, strolling among the stacks of many-sized unopened products waiting to be tested and released.

"Oh, that set of Ganymedeans toy soldiers," Pinario said with relief. His conscience was clear on that item; every tester in the labs knew the special instructions handed down by the Cheyenne Government on the Dangers of Contamination from Culture Particles Hos-

tile to Innocent Urban Populations, a typically muddy ukase from officialdom. He could always — legitimately — fall back and cite the number of that directive. "I've got them off by themselves," he said, walking over to accompany Wiseman, "due to the special danger involved."

"Let's have a look," Wiseman said. "Do you believe there's anything in this caution, or is it more paranoia about 'alien milieux'?"

Pinario said, "It's justified, especially where children's artifacts are concerned."

A few hand-signals, and a slab of wall exposed a side room.

Propped up in the center was a sight that caused Wiseman to halt. A plastic life-size dummy of a child, perhaps five years in appearance, wearing ordinary clothes, sat surrounded by toys. At this moment, the dummy was saying, "I'm tired of that. Do something else." It paused a short time, and then repeated, "I'm tired of that. Do something else."

The toys on the floor, triggered to respond to oral instructions, gave up their various occupations and started afresh.

"It saves on labor costs," Pinario explained. "This is a crop of junk that's got an entire repertoire to go through, before the buyer has his money's worth. If we stuck around to keep them active, we'd be in here all the time."

Directly before the dummy was the group of Ganymedean soldiers, plus the citadel which they had been built to storm. They had been sneaking up on it in an elaborate pattern, but, at the dummy's utterance, they had halted. Now they were regrouping.

"You're getting this all on tape?" Wiseman asked.

"Oh, yes," Pinario said.

The model soldiers stood approximately six inches high, made from the almost indestructible thermoplastic compounds that the Ganymedean manufacturers were famous for. Their uniforms were synthetic, a hodgepodge of various military costumes from the Moons and nearby planets. The citadel itself, a block of ominous dark metallike stuff, resembled a legendary fort; peep-holes dotted its upper surfaces, a drawbridge had been drawn up out of sight, and from the top turret a gaudy flag waved.

With a whistling pop, the citadel fired a projectile at its attackers. The projectile exploded in a cloud of harmless smoke and noise, among a cluster of soldiers.

"It fights back," Wiseman observed.

"But ultimately it loses," Pinario said. "It has to. Psychologically speaking, it symbolizes the external reality. The dozen soldiers, of course, represent to the child his own efforts to cope. By participating in the storming of the citadel,

the child undergoes a sense of adequacy in dealing with the harsh world. Eventually he prevails, but only after a painstaking period of effort and patience." He added, "Anyhow, that's what the instruction booklet says." He handed Wiseman the booklet.

G LANCING over the booklet, Wiseman asked, "And their pattern of assault varies each time?"

"We've had it running for eight days now. The same pattern hasn't cropped up twice. Well, you've got quite a few units involved."

The soldiers were sneaking around, gradually nearing the citadel. On the walls, a number of monitoring devices appeared and began tracking the soldiers. Utilizing other toys being tested, the soldiers concealed themselves.

"They can incorporate accidental configurations of terrain," Pinario explained. "They're object-tropic; when they see, for example, a dollhouse here for testing, they climb into it like mice. They'll be all through it." To prove his point, he picked up a large toy spaceship manufactured by a Uranian company; shaking it, he spilled two soldiers from it.

"How many times do they take the citadel," Wiseman asked, "on a percentage basis?"

"So far, they've been successful one out of nine tries. There's an ad-

justment in the back of the citadel. You can set it for a higher yield of successful tries."

He threaded a path through the advancing soldiers; Wiseman accompanied him, and they bent down to inspect the citadel.

"This is actually the power supply," Pinario said. "Cunning. Also, the instructions to the soldiers emanate from it. High-frequency transmission, from a shot-box."

Opening the back of the citadel, he showed his boss the container of shot. Each shot was an instruction iota. For an assault pattern, the shot were tossed up, vibrated, allowed to settle in a new sequence. Randomness was thereby achieved. But since there was a finite number of shot, there had to be a finite number of patterns.

"We're trying them all," Pinario said.

"And there's no way to speed it up?"

"It'll just have to take time. It may run through a thousand patterns and then—"

"The next one," Wiseman finished, "may have them make a ninety-degree turn and start firing at the nearest human being."

Pinario said somberly, "Or worse. There're a good deal of ergs in that power pack. It's made to put out for five years. But if it all went into something simultaneously—"

"Keep testing," Wiseman said.

They looked at each other and then at the citadel. The soldiers had by now almost reached it. Suddenly one wall of the citadel flapped down; a gun-muzzle appeared, and the soldiers had been flattened.

"I never saw that before," Pinario murmured.

For a moment, nothing stirred. And then the lab's child-dummy, seated among its toys, said, "I'm tired of that. Do something else."

With a tremor of uneasiness, the two men watched the soldiers pick themselves up and regroup.

TWO days later, Wiseman's superior, a heavy-set, short, angry man with popping eyes, appeared in his office. "Listen," Fowler said, "you get those damn toys out of testing. I'll give you until tomorrow." He started back out, but Wiseman stopped him.

"This is too serious," he said. "Come down to the lab and I'll show you."

Arguing all the way, Fowler accompanied him to the lab. "You have no concept of the capital some of these firms have invested in this stuff!" he was saying as they entered. "For every product you've got represented here, there's a ship or a warehouse full on Luna, waiting for official clearance so it can come in!"

Pinario was nowhere in sight. So Wiseman used his key, bypassing

the hand-signals that opened up the testing room.

There, surrounded by toys, sat the dummy that the lab men had built. Around it the numerous toys went through their cycles. The racket made Fowler wince.

"This is the item in particular," Wiseman said, bending down by the citadel. A soldier was in the process of squirming on his belly toward it. "As you can see, there are a dozen soldiers. Given that many, and the energy available to them, plus the complex instruction data—"

Fowler interrupted, "I see only eleven."

"One's probably hiding," Wiseman said.

From behind them, a voice said, "No, he's right." Pinario, a rigid expression on his face, appeared. "I've been having a search made. One is gone."

The three men were silent.

"Maybe the citadel destroyed him," Wiseman finally suggested.

Pinario said, "There's a law of matter dealing with that. If it 'destroyed' him — *what did it do with the remains?*"

"Possibly converted him into energy," Fowler said, examining the citadel and the remaining soldiers.

"We did something ingenious," Pinario said, "when we realized that a soldier was gone. We weighed the remaining eleven plus the citadel. Their combined weight

is exactly equal to that of the original set — the original dozen soldiers and the citadel. So he's in there somewhere." He pointed at the citadel, which at the moment, was pinpointing the soldiers advancing toward it.

Studying the citadel, Wiseman had a deep intuitive feeling. It had changed. It was, in some manner, different.

"Run your tapes," Wiseman said.

"What?" asked Pinario, and then he flushed. "Of course." Going to the child-dummy, he shut it off, opened it, and removed the drum of video recording tape. Shakily, he carried it to the projector.

They sat watching the recording sequences flash by: one assault after another, until the three of them were bleary-eyed. The soldiers advanced, retreated, were fired on, picked themselves up, advanced again . . .

"Stop the transport," Wiseman said suddenly.

The last sequence was re-run.

A soldier moved steadily toward the base of the citadel. A missile, fired at him, exploded and for a time obscured him. Meanwhile, the other eleven soldiers scurried in a wild attempt to mount the walls. The soldier emerged from the cloud of dust and continued. He reached the wall. A section slid back.

The soldier, blending with the dingy wall of the citadel, used the

end of his rifle as a screwdriver to remove his head, then one arm, then both legs. The disassembled pieces were passed into the aperture of the citadel. When only the arm and rifle remained, that, too, crawled into the citadel, worming blindly, and vanished. The aperture slid out of existence.

After a long time, Fowler said in a hoarse voice, "The presumption by the parent would be that the child had lost or destroyed one of the soldiers. Gradually the set would dwindle — with the child getting the blame."

Pinario said, "What do you recommend?"

"Keep it in action," Fowler said, with a nod from Wiseman. "Let it work out its cycle. But don't leave it alone."

"I'll have somebody in the room with it from now on," Pinario agreed.

"Better yet, stay with it yourself," Fowler said.

To himself, Wiseman thought: Maybe we all better stay with it. At least two of us, Pinario and myself.

I wonder what it did with the pieces, he thought.

What did it make?

BY the end of the week, the citadel had absorbed four more of the soldiers.

Watching it through a monitor, Wiseman could see in it no visible



change. Naturally. The growth would be strictly internal, down out of sight.

On and on the eternal assaults, the soldiers wriggling up, the citadel firing in defense. Meanwhile, he had before him a new series of Ganymedeian products. More recent children's toys to be inspected.

"Now what?" he asked himself.

The first was an apparently simple item: a cowboy costume from the ancient American West. At least, so it was described. But he paid only cursory attention to the brochure: the hell with what the Ganymedeians had to say about it.

Opening the box, he laid out the costume. The fabric had a gray, amorphous quality. What a miserably bad job, he thought. It only vaguely resembled a cowboy suit; the lines seemed unformed, hesitant. And the material stretched out of shape as he handled it. He found that he had pulled an entire section of it into a pocket that hung down.

"I don't get it," he said to Pinario. "This won't sell."

"Put it on," Pinario said. "You'll see."

With effort, Wiseman managed to squeeze himself into the suit. "Is it safe?" he asked.

"Yes," Pinario said. "I had it on earlier. This is a more benign idea. But it could be effective. To start it into action, you fantasize."

"Along what lines?"

"Any lines."

The suit made Wiseman think of cowboys, and so he imagined to himself that he was back at the ranch, trudging along the gravel road by the field in which black-faced sheep munched hay with that odd, rapid grinding motion of their lower jaws. He had stopped at the fence — barbed wire and occasional upright posts — and watched the sheep. Then, without warning, the sheep lined up and headed off, in the direction of a shaded hillside beyond his range of vision.

HE saw trees, cyprus growing against the skyline. A chicken hawk, far up, flapped its wings in a pumping action . . . as if, he thought, it's filling itself with more air, to rise higher. The hawk glided energetically off, then sailed at a leisurely pace. Wiseman looked for a sign of its prey. Nothing but the dry mid-summer fields munched flat by the sheep. Frequent grasshoppers. And, on the road itself, a toad. The toad had burrowed into the loose dirt; only its top part was visible.

As he bent down, trying to get up enough courage to touch the warty top of the toad's head, a man's voice said nearby him, "How do you like it?"

"Fine," Wiseman said. He took a deep breath of the dry grass smell; he filled his lungs. "Hey, how do

you tell a female toad from a male toad? By the spots, or what?"

"Why?" asked the man, standing behind him slightly out of sight.

"I've got a toad here."

"Just for the record," the man said, "can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Sure," Wiseman said.

"How old are you?"

That was easy. "Ten years and four months," he said, with pride.

"Where exactly are you, at this moment?"

"Out in the country, Mr. Gaylord's ranch, where my dad takes me and my mother every weekend when we can."

"Turn around and look at me," the man said. "And tell me if you know me."

With reluctance, he turned from the half-buried toad to look. He saw an adult with a thin face and a long, somewhat irregular nose. "You're the man who delivers the butane gas," he said. "For the butane company." He glanced around, and sure enough, there was the truck, parked by the butane gate. "My dad says butane is expensive, but there's no other—"

The man broke in, "Just for the sake of curiosity, what's the name of the butane company?"

"It's right on the truck," Wiseman said, reading the large painted letters. "Pinario Butane Distributors, Petaluma, California. You're Mr. Pinario."

"Would you be willing to swear that you're ten years old, standing in a field near Petaluma, California?" Mr. Pinario asked.

"Sure." He could see, beyond the field, a range of wooded hills. Now he wanted to investigate them; he was tired of standing around gabbing. "I'll see you," he said, starting off. "I have to go get some hiking done."

He started running, away from Mr. Pinario, down the gravel road. Grasshoppers leaped away, ahead of him. Gasping, he ran faster and faster.

"Leon!" Mr. Pinario called after him. "You might as well give up! Stop running!"

"I've got business in those hills," Wiseman panted, still jogging along. Suddenly something struck him full force; he sprawled on his hands, tried to get back up. In the dry midday air, something shimmered; he felt fear and pulled away from it. A shape formed, a flat wall . . .

"You won't get to those hills," Mr. Pinario said, from behind him. "Better stay in roughly one place. Otherwise you collide with things."

Wiseman's hands were damp with blood; he had cut himself falling. In bewilderment, he stared down at the blood . . .

PINARIO helped him out of the cowboy suit, saying, "It's as unwholesome a toy as you could want.

A short period with it on, and the child would be unable to face contemporary reality. Look at you."

Standing with difficulty, Wiseman inspected the suit; Pinario had forcibly taken it from him.

"Not bad," he said in a trembling voice. "It obviously stimulates the withdrawal tendencies already present. I know I've always had a latent retreat fantasy toward my childhood. That particular period, when we lived in the country."

"Notice how you incorporated real elements into it," Pinario said, "to keep the fantasy going as long as possible. If you'd had time, you would have figured a way of incorporating the lab wall into it, possibly as the side of a barn."

Wiseman admitted, "I — already had started to see the old dairy building, where the farmers brought their market milk."

"In time," Pinario said, "it would have been next to impossible to get you out of it."

To himself, Wiseman thought, If it could do that to an adult, just imagine the effect on a child.

"That other thing you have there," Pinario said, "that game, it's a screwball notion. You feel like looking at it now? It can wait."

"I'm okay," Wiseman said. He picked up the third item and began to open it.

"A lot like the old game of Monopoly," Pinario said. "It's called Syndrome."

The game consisted of a board, plus play money, dice, pieces to represent the players. And stock certificates.

"You acquire stock," Pinario said, "same as in all this kind, obviously." He didn't even bother to look at the instructions. "Let's get Fowler down here and play a hand; it takes at least three."

Shortly, they had the Division Director with them. The three men seated themselves at a table, the game of Syndrome in the center.

"Each player starts out equal with the others," Pinario explained, "same as all this type, and during the play, their statuses change according to the worth of the stock they acquire in various economic syndromes."

The syndromes were represented by small, bright plastic objects, much like the archaic hotels and houses of Monopoly.

They threw the dice, moved their counters along the board, bid for and acquired property, paid fines, collected fines, went to the "decontamination chamber" for a period. Meanwhile, behind them, the seven model soldiers crept up on the citadel again and again.

"I'm tired of that," the child-dummy said. "Do something else."

The soldiers regrouped. Once more they started out, getting nearer and nearer the citadel.

Restless and irritable, Wiseman said, "I wonder how long that damn

thing has to go on before we find out what it's for."

"No telling." Pinario eyed a purple-and-gold share of stock that Fowler had acquired. "I can use that," he said. "That's a heavy uranium mine stock on Pluto. What do you want for it?"

"Valuable property," Fowler murmured, consulting his other stocks. "I might make a trade, though."

HOW can I concentrate on a game, Wiseman asked himself, when that thing is getting closer and nearer to — God knows what? To whatever it was built to reach. Its critical mass, he thought.

"Just a second," he said in a slow, careful voice. He put down his hand of stocks. "Could that citadel be a pile?"

"Pile of what?" Fowler asked, concerned with his hand.

Wiseman said loudly, "Forget this game."

"An interesting idea," Pinario said, also putting down his hand. "It's constructing itself into an atomic bomb, piece by piece. Adding until—" He broke off. "No, we thought of that. There're no heavy elements present in it. It's simply a five-year battery, plus a number of small machines controlled by instructions broadcast from the battery itself. You can't make an atomic pile out of that."

"In my opinion," Wiseman said,

"we'd be safer getting it out of here." His experience with the cowboy suit had given him a great deal more respect for the Ganymedean artificers. And if the suit was the benign one . . .

Fowler, looking past his shoulder, said, "There are only six soldiers now."

Both Wiseman and Pinario got up instantly. Fowler was right. Only half of the set of soldiers remained. One more had reached the citadel and been incorporated.

"Let's get a bomb expert from the Military Services in here," Wiseman said, "and let him check it. This is out of our department." He turned to his boss, Fowler. "Don't you agree?"

Fowler said, "Let's finish this game first."

"Why?"

"Because we want to be certain about it," Fowler said. But his rapt interest showed that he had gotten emotionally involved and wanted to play to the end of the game. "What will you give me for this share of Pluto stock? I'm open to offers."

He and Pinario negotiated a trade. The game continued for another hour. At last, all three of them could see that Fowler was gaining control of the various stocks. He had five mining syndromes, plus two plastics firms, an algae monopoly, and all seven of the retail trading syndromes. Due to his control

of the stock, he had, as a byproduct, gotten most of the money.

"I'm out," Pinario said. All he had left were minor shares which controlled nothing. "Anybody want to buy these?"

With his last remaining money, Wiseman bid for the shares. He got them and resumed playing, this time against Fowler alone.

"It's clear that this game is a replica of typical interculture economic ventures," Wiseman said. "The retail trading syndromes are obviously Ganymedeian holdings."

A FLICKER of excitement stirred in him; he had gotten a couple of good throws with the dice and was in a position to add a share to his meager holdings. "Children playing this would acquire a healthy attitude toward economic realities. It would prepare them for the adult world."

But a few minutes later, he landed on an enormous tract of Fowler holdings, and the fine wiped out his resources. He had to give up two shares of stock; the end was in sight.

Pinario, watching the soldiers advance toward the citadel, said, "You know, Leon, I'm inclined to agree with you. This thing may be one terminal of a bomb. A receiving station of some kind. When it's completely wired up, it might bring in a surge of power transmitted from Ganymede."

"Is such a thing possible?" Fowler asked, stacking his play money into the different denominations.

"Who knows what they can do?" Pinario said, wandering around with his hands in his pockets. "Are you almost finished playing?"

"Just about," Wiseman said.

"The reason I say that," Pinario said, "is that now there are only five soldiers. It's speeding up. It took a week for the first one, and only an hour for the seventh. I wouldn't be surprised if the rest go within the next two hours, all five of them."

"We're finished," Fowler said. He had acquired the last share of stock and the last dollar.

Wiseman arose from the table, leaving Fowler. "I'll call Military Services to check the citadel. About this game, though, it's nothing but a steal from our Terran game Monopoly."

"Possibly they don't realize that we have the game already," Fowler said, "under another name."

A stamp of admissibility was placed on the game of Syndrome and the importer was informed. In his office, Wiseman called Military Services and told them what he wanted.

"A bomb expert will be right over," the unhurried voice at the other end of the line said. "Probably you should leave the object alone until he arrives."

Feeling somewhat useless, Wiseman thanked the clerk and hung

up. They had failed to dope out the soldiers-and-citadel war game; now it was out of their hands.

THE bomb expert was a young man, with close-cropped hair, who smiled friendly at them as he set down his equipment. He wore ordinary coveralls, with no protective devices.

"My first advice," he said, after he had looked the citadel over, "is to disconnect the leads from the battery. Or, if you want, we can let the cycle finish out, and then disconnect the leads before any reaction takes place. In other words, allow the last mobile elements to enter the citadel. Then, as soon as they're inside, we disconnect the leads and open her up and see what's been taking place."

"Is it safe?" Wiseman asked.

"I think so," the bomb expert said. "I don't detect any sign of radioactivity in it." He seated himself on the floor, by the rear of the citadel, with a pair of cutting pliers in his hand.

Now only three soldiers remained.

"It shouldn't be long," the young man said cheerfully.

Fifteen minutes later, one of the three soldiers crept up to the base of the citadel, removed his head, arm, legs, body, and disappeared piecemeal into the opening provided for him.

"That leaves two," Fowler said.

Ten minutes later, one of the two remaining soldiers followed the one ahead of him.

The four men looked at each other. "This is almost it," Pinario said huskily.

The last remaining soldier wove his way toward the citadel. Guns within the citadel fired at him, but he continued to make progress.

"Statistically speaking," Wiseman said aloud, to break some of the tension, "it should take longer each time, because there are fewer men for it to concentrate on. It should have started out fast, then got more infrequent until finally this last soldier should put in at least a month trying to—"

"Pipe down," the young bomb expert said in a quiet, reasonable voice. "If you don't mind."

The last of the twelve soldiers reached the base of the citadel. Like those before him, he began to disassemble himself.

"Get those pliers ready," Pinario grated.

The parts of the soldier traveled into the citadel. The opening began to close. From within, a humming became audible, a rising pitch of activity.

"Now, for God's sake!" Fowler cried.

The young bomb expert reached down his pliers and cut into the positive lead of the battery. A spark flashed from the pliers and the young bomb expert jumped reflex-

ively; the pliers flew from his hands and skidded across the floor. "Jeez!" he said. "I must have been grounded." Groggily, he groped about for the pliers.

"You were touching the frame of the thing," Pinario said excitedly. He grabbed the pliers himself and crouched down, fumbling for the lead. "Maybe if I wrap a handkerchief around it," he muttered, withdrawing the pliers and fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief. "Anybody got any thing I can wrap around this? I don't want to get knocked flat. No telling how many —"

"Give it to me," Wiseman demanded, snatching the pliers from him. He shoved Pinario aside and closed the jaws of the pliers about the lead.

Fowler said calmly, "Too late."

WISEMAN hardly heard his superior's voice; he heard the constant tone within his head, and he put up his hands to his ears, futilely, trying to shut it out. Now it seemed to pass directly from the citadel through his skull, transmitted by the bone. *We stalled around too long*, he thought. *Now it has us*. It won out because there are too many of us; we got to squabbling . . .

Within his mind, a voice said, "Congratulations. By your fortitude, you have been successful."

A vast feeling pervaded him

then, a sense of accomplishment.

"The odds against you were tremendous," the voice inside his mind continued. "Anyone else would have failed."

He knew then that everything was all right. They had been wrong.

"What you have done here," the voice declared, "you can continue to do all your life. You can always triumph over adversaries. By patience and persistence, you can win out. The universe isn't such an overwhelming place, after all . . ."

No, he realized with irony, it wasn't.

"They are just ordinary persons," the voice soothed. "So even though you're only one, an individual against many, you have nothing to fear. Give it time — and don't worry."

"I won't," he said aloud.

The humming receded. The voice was gone.

After a long pause, Fowler said, "It's over."

"I don't get it," Pinario said.

"That was what it was supposed to do," Wiseman said. "It's a therapeutic toy. Helps give the child confidence. The disassembling of the soldiers —" he grinned — "ends the separation between him and the world. He becomes one with it. And, in doing so, conquers it."

"Then it's harmless," Fowler said.

"All this work for nothing," Pinario groused. To the bomb expert,

he said, "I'm sorry we got you up here for nothing."

The citadel had now opened its gates wide. Twelve soldiers, once more intact, issued forth. The cycle was complete; the assault could begin again.

Suddenly Wiseman said, "I'm not going to release it."

"What?" Pinario said. "Why not?"

"I don't trust it," Wiseman said. "It's too complicated for what it actually does."

"Explain," Fowler demanded.

"There's nothing to explain," Wiseman said. "Here's this immensely intricate gadget, and all it does is take itself apart and then reassemble itself. There *must* be more, even if we can't—"

"It's therapeutic," Pinario put in.

Fowler said, "I'll leave it up to you, Leon. If you have doubts, then don't release it. We can't be too careful."

"Maybe I'm wrong," Wiseman said, "but I keep thinking to myself: *What did they actually build this for?* I feel we still don't know."

"And the American Cowboy Suit," Pinario added. "You don't want to release that either."

"Only the game," Wiseman said. "Syndrome, or whatever it's called." Bending down, he watched the soldiers as they hustled toward the citadel. Bursts of smoke, again . . . activity, feigned attacks, careful withdrawals . . .

"What are you thinking?" Pinario asked, scrutinizing him.

"Maybe it's a diversion," Wiseman said. "To keep our minds involved. So we won't notice something else." That was his intuition, but he couldn't pin it down. "A red herring," he said. "While something else takes place. That's why it's so complicated. We were *supposed* to suspect it. That's why they built it."

Baffled, he put his foot down in front of a soldier. The soldier took refuge behind his shoe, hiding from the monitors of the citadel.

"There must be something right before our eyes," Fowler said, "that we're not noticing."

"Yes." Wiseman wondered if they would ever find it. "Anyhow," he said, "we're keeping it here, where we can observe it."

Seating himself nearby, he prepared to watch the soldiers. He made himself comfortable for a long, long wait.

AT six o'clock that evening, Joe Hauck, the sales manager for Appeley's Children's Store, parked his car before his house, got out, and strode up the stairs.

Under his arm he carried a large flat package, a "sample" that he had appropriated.

"Hey!" his two kids, Bobby and Lora, squealed as he let himself in. "You got something for us, Dad?" They crowded around him, block-

ing his path. In the kitchen, his wife looked up from the table and put down her magazine.

"A new game I picked up for you," Hauck said. He unwrapped the package, feeling genial. There was no reason why he shouldn't help himself to one of the new games; he had been on the phone for weeks, getting the stuff through Import Standards — and after all was said and done, only one of the three items had been cleared.

As the kids went off with the game, his wife said in a low voice, "More corruption in high places." She had always disapproved of his bringing home items from the store's stock.

"We've got thousands of them," Hauck said. "A warehouse full. Nobody'll notice one missing."

At the dinner table, during the meal, the kids scrupulously studied every word of the instructions that accompanied the game. They were aware of nothing else.

"Don't read at the table," Mrs. Hauck said reprovingly.

Leaning back in his chair, Joe Hauck continued his account of the day. "And after all that time, what did they release? One lousy item. We'll be lucky if we can push enough to make a profit. It was that Shock Troop gimmick that would really have paid off. And that's tied up indefinitely."

He lit a cigarette and relaxed, feeling the peacefulness of his

home, the presence of his wife and children.

His daughter said, "Dad, do you want to play? It says the more who play, the better."

"Sure," Joe Hauck said.

While his wife cleared the table, he and his children spread out the board, counters, dice and paper money and shares of stock. Almost at once he was deep in the game, totally involved; his childhood memories of game-playing swam back, and he acquired shares of stock with cunning and originality, until, toward the conclusion of the game, he had cornered most of the syndromes.

He settled back with a sigh of contentment. "That's that," he declared to his children. "Afraid I had a head start. After all, I'm not new to this type of game." Getting hold of the valuable holdings on the board filled him with a powerful sense of satisfaction. "Sorry to have to win, kids."

His daughter said, "You didn't win."

"You lost," his son said.

"What?" Joe Hauck exclaimed.

"The person who winds up with the most stock *loses*," Lora said.

SHE showed him the instructions. "See? The idea is to get rid of your stocks. Dad, you're out of the game."

"The heck with that," Hauck said, disappointed. "That's no kind

of game." His satisfaction vanished. "That's no fun."

"Now we two have to play out the game," Bobby said, "to see who finally wins."

As he got up from the board, Joe Hauck grumbled, "I don't get it. What would anybody see in a game where the winner winds up with nothing at all?"

Behind him, his two children continued to play. As stock and money changed hands, the children became more and more animated. When the game entered its final stages, the children were in a state of ecstatic concentration.

"They don't know Monopoly," Hauck said to himself, "so this screwball game doesn't seem strange to them."

Anyhow, the important thing was that the kids enjoyed playing Syndrome; evidently it would sell, and that was what mattered. Already the two youngsters were learning the naturalness of surrendering their holdings. They gave up their stocks and money avidly, with a kind of trembling abandon.

Glancing up, her eyes bright, Lora said, "It's the best educational toy you ever brought home, Dad!"

—PHILIP K. DICK



**for
your
information**

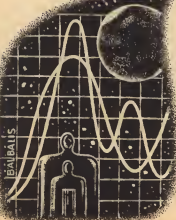


BY WILLY LEY

DEAD OR ALIVE?

DURING the early part of the eighteenth century some very vague rumors about gigantic bones reached Paris. Unaccompanied by any evidence, these rumors traveled via Spain, for they originated from Argentina. Shorn of embroidery and conjecture, they stated that large bones could be found in the pampas. These were said to be as large as the bones of elephants.

The gentlemen of the Academy in Paris decided that it was best



not to say anything. As far as anybody knew, there were no elephants in the Americas. Still, South America was not well explored yet, so — let the Spaniards prove their case if they have one.

It so happened that they did.

During the earlier years of the 18th century only occasional single bones had been seen by literate men, usually in places where a river cut into the soil of the pampas. In 1789 a complete skeleton was found, fortunately not too far from Buenos Aires, at a place called Lujan. The viceroy ordered that the bones be excavated and sent to Madrid. There a scientist named Garriga assembled them and, in 1796, published a first description.

THE animal had been about the size of an elephant, or would have been if its legs had been a little longer. It stood eight feet tall at the shoulder and had an overall length of 14 feet.

The first thing that impressed Garriga was the legs, but not because they were beautiful. The bones were incredibly heavy, far more massive than the corresponding bones of an elephant. The tail was also very massive and long for a big animal (which usually have tiny tails) because it was long enough to just touch the ground. But while the comparison with an elephant was obvious because of the size, it broke down when it

came to the foot skeleton and the skull. They did not resemble anything ever seen before, at least not in such a size. The skull showed clearly that this giant was a sloth.

Now it needed a name, which was compounded from the two Greek words for "large" (*megas*) and "mammal" (*therion*) in the Latinized version of *Megatherium americanum*.

Naturally things did not stop with this first skeleton. Pictures of it got into books, partly because it was the first and partly because it was so big.

More discoveries were made and scientists soon knew that there had been several species of giant sloth. The second species to be definitely established was *Myodon robustus* (Fig. 1), which was 11 feet long and differed from *Megatherium* mostly in having forelegs about as long as its hindlegs; in *Megatherium* the forelegs are a good deal longer than the hindlegs.

The third species was named *Myodon gracilis*. Now the word *gracilis* would normally be translated as "dainty," but in this case the normal, or any other, translation just did not apply. The animal was by no means "dainty." It was a heavy-boned nine-foot monster.

It is possible that *gracilis* was used merely as the opposite of *robustus*. It is more likely that this name is a case of Teutonic humor, for the man who coined it was Pro-

fessor Hermann Burmeister, of Germany, who had gone to South America on a trip of exploration and then decided to stay and settle down, mostly because of *Megatherium* and *Mylodon*.

HERMANN Burmeister was fifty years old when he made this decision (in 1861 or 1862), but he still managed to enjoy thirty-one years of residence in the country he adopted for zoological reasons. When I state that he "enjoyed" these years, I do not use the term loosely. According to all accounts, life in Prof. Burmeister's house was friendly, witty and gay, and it was permanently open to any fellow scientist and any intelligent layman who was willing to talk *Megatherium* and other pampas fossils. That there could possibly ever be a shortage of domestic or imported wines never occurred to Burmeister, unless he had nightmares, which seems unlikely.

Burmeister's closest scientific associate and his successor (when Burmeister died in 1892 at the age of 85) was Professor Florentino Ameghino. Up to 1892, expert descriptions of pampas fossils had been in German; from then on, they were in Spanish. But behind all the scientific gaiety and the fun and thrill of a steady stream of discoveries there was one unanswered question. How old were the bones Burmeister and Ameghino dug up,

cleaned, measured, assembled and described?

This question at that time was simply unanswerable, but Burmeister thought that while he could not name a figure, he could at least give an answer of sorts.

There was general agreement that man had originated in Asia and invaded the American double continent via the Bering Strait. This naturally meant that man had arrived in South America much later than in North America, since he had to traverse the length of the North American continent first. Any figures which were then mentioned were naturally guesses; man had probably arrived at the northern end of South America 3000 to 5000 years ago. Burmeister based his answer on this figure.

Man and *Megatherium* had never met, Burmeister was convinced, because the natives did not have any recollection of such animals and had invented a legend to account for the bones. They thought that the large animal was something like a gigantic mole which was instantly killed by sunlight if it inadvertently "broke surface."

Burmeister's ideas might have been well reasoned, but the facts were against him. *Megatherium*, the giant sloth, was very often associated with a giant armadillo — *Glyptodon* — and the two animals had obviously lived at the same

time. But remains of *Glyptodon* and human artifacts were sometimes found together, and the prize discovery was a human skeleton sitting inside the giant carapace of a glyptodon. This was certainly an ancient form of burial for somebody of importance. Finally, a skeleton of *Megatherium* was unearthed which was incomplete in a significant manner. The four legs were there and undisturbed, but most of the other bones were missing, and there had been a fire in the center, between the legs. It was perfectly apparent that here was a giant sloth that had been caught in a pit and roasted right in the trap from above.

There was no doubt then that the early South American Indians had known *Megatherium* "in the flesh," but it still did not answer the question: when had this happened?

IN the meanwhile something else had taken place which did not seem to have a connection for a long time. By coincidence, another German who had made his home in South America figures in this section of the story, though not as prominently by far as Professor Burmeister.

Near the southern end of Patagonia there is a fjord or inlet — locally called a "canal" — with the gloomy name of *Ultima Esperanza* (Last Hope). There the retired

German sea captain Eberhard bought himself some land and built a house. Visitors to the Eberhard ranch noticed that the hide of a large animal was hanging over some bushes. Some of these visitors — or so it was told later — tried to cut a piece off that hide, which proved to be extraordinarily difficult. The reason was that a large number of bean-sized "bones" were embedded in the hide. If any one of these visitors had been a naturalist, this fact would have done more than just make him suspicious; but evidently nobody, including Captain Eberhard, had any profound knowledge of natural history.

At some time — the date is uncertain, but it was after Burmeister's death — such a piece of skin reached Ameghino. It has never been established whether this particular piece came from the Eberhard ranch; Ameghino himself did not think so. The important thing was that this piece of skin was, or looked, fresh. Not fresh like animal skin in a butcher shop, but rather like untanned hide in a saddler's establishment. In any case it certainly was not fossil and Ameghino decided that logic, however incredible, had to prevail. A piece of *Mylodon* skin proved that the animal still existed somewhere.

Ameghino called a press conference. Newspapers around the world carried articles which de-

clared: "The Giant Sloth Is not Extinct." The very fact that this animal, which for so many years had been so proverbially extinct, was supposed to be still alive set thought going in various directions at once.

Was there any evidence in addition to the piece of skin?

Did somebody in the past mention the giant sloth in any manner, probably with a native name which conveyed no meaning to readers elsewhere?

And, finally, where can they be found, to be captured for a zoological garden?

Professor Ameghino said that he did have additional evidence. Besides his piece of skin from an unknown source, there was the Ultima Esperanza hide. And then there was the story told by Ramón Lista, onetime Governor of Santa Cruz — he was later killed by Indians.

Lista reported that he had been with a hunting party in the interior of Patagonia. While camping at night, he and his party had seen an unknown animal which looked somewhat like a pangolin, except that it was covered with long hair. The animal escaped, even though the hunters shot at it with their rifles.

SINCE Ramón Lista was a learned man with much experience in Patagonia (he wrote sev-

eral books about his land which received high praise and are said to be still worthwhile reading), a story like this deserved attention. Strangely enough, Ameghino at first disregarded it, thinking that Lista must have been somehow mistaken. But then he suddenly changed his mind. A while later he even coined the scientific name *Neomylodon listai* (Lista's New Mylodon) and pointed out that it was quite possible that one or more of the hunters' shots had hit, but that they did no harm because of the bony nodules in a Mylodon's hide.

Then a native legend about a *Iemish* was dragged into the giant sloth debate and things really became confused. The *Iemish* was claimed to be a large beast that lived both on land and in the water, usually hiding in the water. It was a flesh-eater and drowned horses to eat them. Or else the *Iemish* was a beast the size of an ox that was harmless and nocturnal. During the day it slept in burrows which it had dug with its large claws. Finally somebody supplied Ameghino with a "translation" of the word *Iemish*: it was supposed to mean "the one with little stones on it." Ameghino thought that all this went together beautifully and could apply only to the *Neomylodon listai* that he had named.

All this, however, did not go together beautifully. An animal is

either a flesh-eater, in which case it can't be called harmless, or it is harmless, in which case it is not likely to be a flesh-eater. But while this could be reasoned out by logic alone, it took an enormous amount of work to establish how the confusion had taken place.

The legend of the *Iemish*, the one that often retreats into the water and is a flesh-eater, refers essentially to the jaguar, which is a carnivore and does swim well. It probably also contains some confusion with the giant river otter of South America, which is of nearly the same size, is also carnivorous, like all otters, and, like all otters, lives in the water. The names which could be found in dictionaries that sound like *iemish* mostly are native words for "otter."

Of course the word does not translate the way Ameghino reported. It seems to be simply a name. But Ameghino, having been handed this significant-looking "translation" by somebody, made the mistake of applying the name *iemish* to the other legend about the ox-sized harmless nocturnal animal. (It might be added that the two legends did not exist in the same place. Their origins were 1500 or more miles apart.)

Ameghino, after having made this mistake, concluded that he had taken care of the question of available evidence. Then he set out to answer the second question;

namely, whether the giant sloth might not have been mentioned by early writers on South America under another and probably native name. Here he was not only far more careful, he was also more successful.

He came across a book entitled *Historia de la Conquista del Paraguay, Rio de la Plata y Tucumàn* by Father Pedro Lozano, S. J., published 1740-1746, in which an animal *su* or *succarath* was mentioned. It was said to be large and to have the habit of carrying its young on its back. The natives were stated to hunt it in spite of the dangers involved, for they wanted its skin to make durable cloaks.

HARDLY anybody in Europe had ever heard of Father Lozano before, but when Ameghino reported on the *su* in professional journals, all European zoologists had an automatic reaction. They knew the *su*. Its picture, however fantastic, was on the title page of the enormous zoology book by the Swiss savant Konrad Gesner (Fig. 2) which every one of the Europeans had read.

There in volume one of Gesner's *Historia animalium* (published in Zürich in 1955) one could find a paragraph headed *De Subo* ("Of the Su") which translates as follows:

The Most Obnoxious Animal that

might be seen, called *Su* in the New Lands. There is a place in the newly found land where lives a people calling itself in its language *Patagones*, and since the land is not very warm they cover themselves with fur from an animal they call *Su*, which means Water, by reason of its dwelling mainly near water. It is very dreadful, obnoxious, as may be seen. When hunted by the hunters, it takes its young upon its back, covers them with its long tail and thus flees. It is caught in pits and killed with arrows.

This had made no sense until the fight about the still-living giant sloth started; now things had changed so that Gesner's paragraph *might* make an exciting kind of sense.

As long as nobody had paid much attention to Gesner's paragraph as a whole, even less attention had been paid to a note which said that this description had been taken from "Andreas Theuetus." Since Gesner wrote in Latin, it was only logical that he used the Latinized form; actually this was the name of André Thévet. Thévet's paragraph on the *Su* is the same as Gesner's naturally, but Thévet has one more sentence telling what happens after a *su* has fallen into a pit:

When it sees that it is caught, it maims and kills its young (as if maddened) and gives such terrible cries that it makes the Savages very fearful and timid. Yet in the end they kill it with arrows and then they flay it.

Incidentally, each of the learned men made a linguistic mistake. Gesner did not know that the name of the Patagonians is not derived from their own language, and Thévet was wrong in thinking that *su* means water. Its meaning is "covering." Ameghino came close by translating *su* as "cloak." Thévet is the only literary source which might be construed as referring to a giant sloth. If one wants to accept it — and I don't see why not — one of the smaller forms of giant sloth must have been still alive in the southern part of South America during the Middle Ages.

THERE are two more things: Where did the hide on Captain Eberhard's ranch come from?

Well, Captain Eberhard himself located a cave some distance from his home. The cave was almost completely closed (one could just squeeze through) by a wall of boulders which was obviously piled up by people. Inside the cave, the amateur explorers found a human skeleton, two more hides, and what is generally called a kitchen midden. Later, professional investigators discovered *Myloodon* droppings over a foot deep, and when they went to work on these droppings, they saw that they contained ends of plant stalks which had been *cut*. The teeth of the animals could not have produced such a clean end.



Fig. 1: Reconstruction of extinct giant sloth *Mylodon*.

One of the investigators, Professor Santiago Roth, then proposed to rename the animal *Grypotherium domesticum*, since the Indians had apparently domesticated it. This would not have been impossible by itself, but there is one major fact that speaks against the idea: domesticated animals do not become extinct! Man sees to it that they don't. If the Indians had widely domesticated the *Mylodon*, it would still be around with its masters. More likely the animals were just rounded up in the open and chased into the cave, where they were kept alive with forage until the time came to kill and eat them.

Before finishing up with the current scientific opinion about the whole matter, one episode, amusing in retrospect, must be told. Early in this century Sir Ray Lankester, director of the Natural History Museum in London, permitted himself to be quoted to the effect that it seemed possible that a ground sloth of the *Mylodon* type might still be alive in little-known parts of Patagonia.

This was good enough for the owner of the *London Daily Express*. He decided to finance an expedition to Patagonia to search for a living mylodon and bring it back to England, alive if possible, dead



Fig. 2: The animal Su as it appears on title page of Konrad Gesner's *Historia Animalium*

if it could not be helped.

The expedition was headed by a man named Hesketh H. Pritchard, who must have been an impatient type. Nobody knew at the time that Ameghino had blundered with respect to the Iemish, so Pritchard set out with what he believed to be a body of facts to guide him. In South America, he quickly learned that a major mistake had been made somewhere and he grew furious. Though he had traveled thousands of miles and had only another two or three hundred miles to go to reach Captain Eberhard's ranch, he did not do so. He turned around, went back to

England and wrote perhaps the most ill-tempered book ever printed. The Iemish did not exist, the legend about it was the invention of some publicity seekers, the whole thing was a pack of lies and, most important, he, Hesketh H. Pritchard, had been hoaxed.

Well, how do things stand now?

ONE of the newer and most useful tools of science, radio-carbon dating, does not help much here for lack of material. The first list of radio-carbon dates (*Science*, February 2, 1951) contained two entries about giant sloth material. They were:

No. 484 *Chilean Sloth*: Dung of giant sloth from Mylodon Cave, Ultima Esperanza, Chile (51° 35'S.). Not associated with human artifacts, though sloth and man found together in three caves 125 miles distant (cf. sample 485) 10,800 \pm 570; 10,864 \pm 720; 10,832 \pm 400 (years).

No. 485 *Chilean Bone*: Burned bone of sloth, horse and guanaco, associated with human bones and artifacts. Valuable in determining time of arrival of man at tip of South America. Material found in Palliaike Cave, 125 miles east of Mylodon. Comment: Most ancient of human samples from South America. 8639 \pm 450.

In other words, the samples that happened to be dated are pretty old and do not help us in determin-

ing how long the giant sloth lived in South America. It would be so nice if we found a sample which at least makes it certain that Thévet's Su was a ground sloth.

Pritchard's expedition was not the last. Two others were organized. Both returned empty-handed. This, of course, is not proof that there are no living ground sloths any more; large portions of South America are still poorly known. And one can always argue that it is hard to see why a plant-eater should become extinct in green South America, where there have been no climatic changes for thousands of years. There is no answer to that argument except that no living, or freshly killed, ground sloth has yet turned up.

— WILLY LEY

GUARD YOUR FAMILY

FIGHT CANCER WITH A
CHECKUP AND A CHECK
AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY





Charity Case

By JIM HARMON

Certainly I see things

that aren't there

and don't say what my

voice says—but how

can I prove

that I don't have my health?

WHEN he began his talk with "You got your health, don't you?" it touched those spots inside me. That was when I did it.

Why couldn't what he said have been "The best things in life are free, buddy" or "Every dog has his day, fellow" or "If at first you don't succeed, man"? No, he had to use that one line. You wouldn't blame me. Not if you believe me.

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

The first thing I can remember, the start of all this, was when I was four or five somebody was soiling my bed for me. I absolutely was not doing it. I took long naps morning and evening so I could lie awake all night to see that it wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen. But in the morning the bed would sit there dispassionately soiled and convict me on circumstantial evidence. My punishment was as sure as the tide.

Dad was a compact man, small eyes, small mouth, tight clothes. He was narrow but not mean. For punishment, he locked me in a windowless room and told me to sit still until he came back. It wasn't so bad a punishment, except that when Dad closed the door, the light turned off and I was left there in the dark.

Being four or five, I didn't know any better, so I thought Dad made it dark to add to my punishment. But I learned he didn't know the light went out. It came back on when he unlocked the door. Every time I told him about the light as soon as I could talk again, but he said I was lying.

ONE day, to prove me a liar, he opened and closed the door a few times from outside. The light winked off and on, off and on, always shining when Dad stuck his head inside. He tried using the door from the inside, and the light

stayed on, no matter how hard he slammed the door.

I stayed in the dark longer for lying about the light.

Alone in the dark, I wouldn't have had it so bad if it wasn't for the things that came to me.

They were real to me. They never touched me, but they had a little boy. He looked the way I did in the mirror. They did unpleasant things to him.

Because they were real, I talked about them as if they were real, and I almost earned a bunk in the home for retarded children until I got smart enough to keep the beasts to myself.

My mother hated me. I loved her, of course. I remember her smell mixed up with flowers and cookies and winter fires. I remember she hugged me on my ninth birthday. The trouble came from the notes written in my awkward hand that she found, calling her names I didn't understand. Sometimes there were drawings. I didn't write those notes or make those drawings.

My mother and father must have been glad when I was sent away to reform school after my thirteenth birthday party, the one no one came to.

The reform school was nicer. There were others there who'd had it about like me. We got along. I didn't watch their shifty eyes too much, or ask them what they

shifted to see. They didn't talk about my screams at night.

It was home.

My trouble there was that I was always being framed for stealing. I didn't take any of those things they located in my bunk. Stealing wasn't in my line. If you believe any of this at all, you'll see why it couldn't be me who did the stealing.

There was reason for me to steal, if I could have got away with it. The others got money from home to buy the things they needed — razor blades, candy, sticks of tea. I got a letter from Mom or Dad every now and then before they were killed, saying they had sent money or that it was enclosed, but somehow I never got a dime of it.

When I was expelled from reform school, I left with just one idea in mind — to get all the money I could ever use for the things I needed and the things I wanted.

IT was two or three years later that I skulked into Brother Partridge's mission on Durbin Street.

The preacher and half a dozen men were singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* in the meeting room. It was a drafty hall with varnished camp chairs. I shuffled in at the back with my suitcoat collar turned up around my stubbled jaw. I made my hand shaky as I ran it through my knotted hair. Partridge was

supposed to think I was just a bum. As an inspiration, I hugged my chest to make him think I was some wino nursing a flask full of Sneaky Pete. All I had there was a piece of copper alloy tubing inside a slice of plastic hose for taking care of myself, rolling sailors and the like. Who had the price of a bottle?

Partridge didn't seem to notice me, but I knew that was an act. I knew people were always watching every move I made. He braced his red-furred hands on the sides of his auctioneer's stand and leaned his splotched eagle beak toward us. "Brothers, this being Thanksgiving, I pray the good Lord that we all are truly thankful for all that we have received. Amen."

Some skin-and-bones character I didn't know struggled out of his seat, amening. I could see he had a lot to be thankful for — somewhere he had received a fix.

"Brothers," Partridge went on after enjoying the interruption with a beaming smile, "you shall all be entitled to a bowl of turkey soup prepared by Sister Partridge, a generous supply of sweet rolls and dinner rolls contributed by the Early Morning Bakery of this city, and all the coffee you can drink. Let us march out to *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, John Philip Sousa's grand old patriotic song."

I had to laugh at all those bums clattering the chairs in front of me,

scampering after water soup and stale bread. As soon as I got cleaned up, I was going to have dinner in a good restaurant, and I was going to order such expensive food and leave such a large tip for the waiter and send one to the chef that they were going to think I was rich, and some executive with some brokerage firm would see me and say to himself, "Hmm, executive material. Just the type we need. I beg your pardon, sir—" just like the razor-blade comic-strip ads in the old magazines that Frankie the Pig sells three for a quarter.

I was marching. Man, was I ever marching, but the secret of it was I was only marking time the way we did in fire drills at the school.

They passed me, every one of them, and marched out of the meeting room into the kitchen. Even Partridge made his way down from the auctioneer's stand like a vulture with a busted wing and darted through his private door.

I was alone, marking time behind the closed half of double doors. One good breath and I raced past the open door and flattened myself to the wall. Crockery was ringing and men were slurping inside. No one had paid any attention to me. That was pretty odd. People usually watch my every move, but a man's luck has to change sometime, doesn't it?

Following the wallboard, I went

down the side of the room and behind the last row of chairs, closer, closer, and halfway up the room again to the entrance—the entrance and the little wooden box fastened to the wall beside it.

The box was old and made out of some varnished wood. There was a slot in the top. There wasn't any sign anywhere around it, but you knew it wasn't a mailbox.

My hand went flat on the top of the box. One finger at a time drew up and slipped into the slot. Index, fore, third, little. I put my thumb in my palm and shoved. My hand went in.

There were coins inside. I scooped them up with two fingers and held them fast with the other two. Once I dropped a dime — not a penny, milled edge — and I started to reach for it. No, don't be greedy. I knew I would probably lose my hold on all the coins if I tried for that one. I had all the rest. It felt like about two dollars, or close to it.

Then I found the bill. A neatly folded bill in the box. Somehow I knew all along it would be there.

I tried to read the numbers on the bill with my fingertips, but I couldn't. It had to be a one. Who drops anything but a one into a Skid Row collection box? But still there were tourists, slummers. They might leave a fifty or even a hundred. A hundred!

Yes, it felt new, crisp. It had to

be a hundred. A single would be creased or worn.

I pulled my hand out of the box. I *tried* to pull my hand out of the box.

I knew what the trouble was, of course. I was in a monkey trap. The monkey reaches through the hole for the bait, and when he gets it in his hot little fist, he can't get his hand out. He's too greedy to let go, so he stays there, caught as securely as if he were caged.

I was a man, not a monkey. I knew why I couldn't get my hand out. But I couldn't lose that money, especially that century bill. Calm, I ordered myself. *Calm*.

The box was fastened to the vertical tongue-and-groove laths of the woodwork, not the wall. It was old lumber, stiffened by a hundred layers of paint since 1908. The paint was as thick and strong as the boards. The box was fastened fast. Six-inch spike nails, I guessed.

Calmly, I flung my whole weight away from the wall. My wrist almost cracked, but there wasn't even a bend in the box. Carefully, I tried to jerk my fist straight up, to pry off the top of the box. It was as if the box had been carved out of one solid piece of timber. It wouldn't go up, down, left or right. But I kept trying.

While keeping a lookout for Partridge and somebody stepping out of the kitchen for a pull on a bottle, I spotted the clock for the

first time, a Western Union clock high up at the back of the hall. Just as I seen it for the first time, the electricity wound the spring motor inside like a chicken having its neck wrung.

The next time I glanced at the clock, it said ten minutes had gone by. My hand still wasn't free and I hadn't budged the box.

"This," Brother Partridge said, "is one of the most profound experiences of my life."

My head hinged until it lined my eyes up with Brother Partridge. The pipe hung heavy in my pocket, but he was too far from me.

"A vision of you at the box projected itself on the crest of my soup," the preacher explained in wonderment.

I nodded. "Swimming right in there with the dead duck."

"Cold turkey," he corrected. "Are you scoffing at a miracle?"

"People are always watching me, Brother," I said. "So now they do it even when they aren't around. I should have known it would come to that."

The pipe was suddenly a weight I wanted off me. I would try robbing a collection box, knowing positively that I would get caught, but I wasn't dumb enough to murder. Somebody, somewhere, would be a witness to it. I had never got away with anything in my life. I was too smart to even try anything but the little things.

"I may be able to help you," Brother Partridge said, "if you have faith and a conscience."

"I've got something better than a conscience," I told him.

BROTHER PARTRIDGE regarded me solemnly. "There must be something special about you, for your apprehension to come through miraculous intervention. But I can't imagine what."

"I always get apprehended somehow, Brother," I said. "I'm pretty special."

"Your name?"

"William Hagle." No sense lying. I had been booked and printed before.

Partridge prodded me with his bony fingers as if making sure I was substantial. "Come. Let's sit down, if you can remove your fist from the money box."

I opened up my fingers and let the coins ring inside the box and I drew out my hand. The bill stuck to the sweat on my fingers and slid out along with the digits. A one, I decided. I had got into trouble for a grubby single. It wasn't any century. I had been kidding myself.

I unfolded the note. Sure enough, it wasn't a hundred-dollar bill, but it was a twenty, and that was almost the same thing to me. I creased it and put it back into the slot.

As long as it stalled off the cops, I'd talk to Partridge.

We took a couple of camp chairs and I told him the story of my life, or most of it. It was hard work on an empty stomach; I wished I'd had some of that turkey soup. Then again I was glad I hadn't. Something always happened to me when I thought back over my life. The same thing.

The men filed out of the kitchen, wiping their chins, and I went right on talking.

After some time Sister Partridge bustled in and snapped on the overhead lights and I kept talking. The brother still hadn't used the phone to call the cops.

"Remarkable," Partridge finally said when I got so hoarse I had to take a break. "One is almost — almost — reminded of Job. William, you are being punished for some great sin. Of that, I'm sure."

"Punished for a sin? But, Brother, I've always had it like this, as long as I can remember. What kind of a sin could I have committed when I was fresh out of my crib?"

"William, all I can tell you is that time means nothing in Heaven. Do you deny the transmigration of souls?"

"Well," I said, "I've had no personal experience—"

"Of course you have, William! Say you don't remember. Say you don't want to remember. But don't say you have no personal experience!"

"And you think I'm being pun-

ished for something I did in a previous life?"

He looked at me in disbelief. "What else could it be?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I certainly haven't done anything that bad in *this* life."

"William, if you atone for this sin, perhaps the horde of locusts will lift from you."

It wasn't much of a chance, but I was unused to having any at all. I shook off the dizziness of it. "By the Lord Harry, Brother, I'm going to give it a try!" I cried.

"I believe you," Partridge said, surprised at himself.

He ambled over to the money box on the wall. He tapped the bottom lightly and a box with no top slid out of the slightly larger box. He reached in, fished out the bill and presented it to me.

"Perhaps this will help in your atonement," he said.

I crumpled it into my pocket fast. Not meaning to sound ungrateful, I'm pretty sure he hadn't noticed it was a twenty.

And then the bill seemed to lie there, heavy, a lead weight. It would have been different if I had managed to get it out of the box myself. You know how it is.

Money you haven't earned doesn't seem real to you.

THERE was something I forgot to mention so far. During the year between when I got out of the

reformatory and the one when I tried to steal Brother Partridge's money, I killed a man.

It was all an accident, but killing somebody is reason enough to get punished. It didn't have to be a sin in some previous life, you see.

I had gotten my first job in too long, stacking boxes at the freight door of Baysinger's. The drivers unloaded the stuff, but they just dumped it off the truck. An empty rear end was all they wanted. The freight boss told me to stack the boxes inside, neat and not too close together.

I stacked boxes the first day. I stacked more the second. The third day I went outside with my baloney and crackers. It was warm enough even for November.

Two of them, dressed like Harvard seniors, caps and striped duffer jackets, came up to the crate I was dining off.

"Work inside, Jack?" the taller one asked.

"Yeah," I said, chewing.

"What do you do, Jack?" the fatter one asked.

"Stack boxes."

"Got a union card?"

I shook my head.

"Application?"

"No," I said. "I'm just helping out during Christmas."

"You're a scab, buddy," Longlegs said. "Don't you read the papers?"

"I don't like comic strips," I said.

They sighed. I think they hated to do it, but I was bucking the system.

Fats hit me high. Long-legs hit me low. I blew cracker crumbs into their faces. After that, I just let them go. I know how to take a beating. That's one thing I knew

Then lying there, bleeding to myself, I heard them talking. I heard noises like *make an example of him* and *do something permanent* and I squirmed away across the rubbish like a polite mouse.

I made it around a corner of brick and stood up, hurting my knee on a piece of brown-splotched pipe. There were noises on the other angle of the corner and so I tested if the pipe was loose and it was. I closed my eyes and brought the pipe up and then down.

It felt as if I connected, but I was so numb, I wasn't sure until I unscrewed my eyes.

There was a big man in a heavy wool overcoat and gray homburg spread on a damp centerfold from the *News*. There was a pick-up slip from the warehouse under the fingers of one hand, and somebody had beaten his brains out.

The police figured it was part of some labor dispute, I guess, and they never got to me.

I suppose I was to blame anyway. If I hadn't been alive, if I hadn't been there to get beaten up, it wouldn't have happened. I could see the point in making me suffer

for it. There was a lot to be said for looking at it like that. But there was nothing to be said for telling Brother Partridge about the accident, or murder, or whatever had happened that day.

SEARCHING myself after I left Brother Partridge, I finally found a strip of gray adhesive tape on my side, out of the fuzzy area. Making the twenty the size of a thick postage stamp, I peeled back the tape and put the folded bill on the white skin and smoothed the tape back.

There was only one place for me to go now. I headed for the public library. It was only about twenty blocks, but not having had anything to eat since the day before, it enervated me.

The downstairs washroom was where I went first. There was nobody there but an old guy talking urgently to a kid with thick glasses, and somebody building a fix in one of the booths. I could see charred matches dropping down on the floor next to his tennis shoes, and even a few grains of white stuff. But he managed to hold still enough to keep from spilling more from the spoon.

I washed my hands and face, smoothed my hair down, combing it with my fingers. Going over my suit with damp toweling got off a lot of the dirt. I put my collar on the outside of my jacket and

creased the wings with my thumb-nail so it would look more like a sports shirt. It didn't really. I still looked like a bum, but sort of a neat, non-objectionable bum.

The librarian at the main desk looked sympathetically hostile, or hostilely sympathetic.

"I'd like to get into the stacks, miss," I said, "and see some of the old newspapers."

"Which newspapers?" the old girl asked stiffly.

I thought back. I couldn't remember the exact date. "Ones for the first week in November last year."

"We have the *Times* microfilmed. I would have to project them for you."

"I didn't want to see the *Times*," I said, fast. "Don't you have any newspapers on paper?" I didn't want her to see what I wanted to read up on.

"We have the *News*, bound, for last year."

I nodded. "That's the one I wanted to see."

She sniffed and told me to follow her. I didn't rate a cart to my table, I guess, or else the bound papers weren't supposed to come out of the stacks.

The cases of books, row after row, smelled good. Like old leather and good pipe tobacco. I had been here before. In this world, it's the man with education who makes the money. I had been reading the

Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia. So far I knew a lot about Mark Antony, Atomic Energy, Boron, Brussels, Catapults, Demons, and Divans.

I guess I had stopped to look around at some of the titles, because the busy librarian said sharply, "Follow me."

I heard my voice say, "A pleasure. What about after work?"

I didn't say it, but I was used to my voice independently saying things. Her neck got to flaming, but she walked stiffly ahead. She didn't say anything. She must be awful mad, I decided. But then I got the idea she was flushed with pleasure. I'm pretty ugly and I looked like a bum, but I was young. You had to grant me that.

She waved a hand at the rows of bound *News* and left me alone with them. I wasn't sure if I was allowed to hunt up a table to lay the books on or not, so I took the volume for last year and laid it on the floor. That was the cleanest floor I ever saw.

It didn't take me long to find the story. The victim was a big man, because the story was on the second page of the Nov. 4 edition.

I started to tear the page out, then only memorized the name and home address. Somebody was sure to see me and I couldn't risk trouble just now.

I stuck the book back in line and left by the side door.

I went to a dry-cleaner, not the cheapest place I knew, because I wouldn't be safe with the change from a twenty in that neighborhood. My suit was cleaned while I waited. I paid a little extra and had it mended. Funny thing about a suit — it's almost never completely shot unless you just have it ripped off you or burned up. It wasn't exactly in style, but some rich executives wore suits out of style that they had paid a lot of money for. I remembered Fredric March's double-breasted in *Executive Suite* while Walter Pidgeon and the rest wore Ivy Leagues. Maybe I would look like an eccentric executive.

I bought a new shirt, a good used pair of shoes, and a dime pack of single-edged razor blades. I didn't have a razor, but anybody with nerve can shave with a single-edge blade and soap and water.

The clerk took my two bucks in advance and I went up to my room.

I washed out my socks and underwear, took a bath, shaved and trimmed my hair and nails with the razor blade. With some soap on my finger, I scrubbed my teeth. Finally I got dressed.

Everything was all right except that I didn't have a tie. They had them, a quarter a piece, where I got the shoes. It was only six blocks — I could go back. But I didn't want to wait. I wanted to complete the picture.

The razor blade sliced through

the pink bath towel evenly. I cut out a nice modern-style tie, narrow, with some horizontal stripes down at the bottom. I made a tight, thin knot. It looked pretty good.

I was ready to leave, so I started for the door. I went back. I had almost forgotten my luggage. The box still had three unwrapped blades in it. I pocketed it. I hefted the used blade, dulled by all the work it had done. You can run being economical into stinginess. I tossed it into the wastebasket.

I had five hamburgers with, and five cups of coffee. I couldn't finish all of the French fries.

"Mac," I said to the fat counter-man, who looked like all fat counter-men, "give me a Milwaukee beer."

He stopped polishing the counter in front of his friend. "Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or Milwaukee, Oregon?"

"Wisconsin."

He didn't argue.

It was cold and bitter. All beer is bitter, no matter what they say on TV. I like beer. I like the bitterness of it.

It felt like another, but I checked myself. I needed a clear head. I thought about going back to the hotel for some sleep; I still had the key in my pocket (I wasn't trusting it to any clerk). No, I had had sleep on Thanksgiving, bracing up for trying the lift at Brother Partridge's. Let's see, it was daylight

outside again, so this was the day after Thanksgiving. But it had only been sixteen or twenty hours since I had slept. That was enough.

I left the money on the counter for the hamburgers with and coffee and the beer. There was \$7.68 left.

As I passed the counterman's friend on his stool, my voice said, "I think you're yellow."

He turned slowly, his jaw moving further away from his brain.

I winked. "It was just a bet for me to say that to you. I won two bucks. Half of it is yours." I held out the bill to him.

His paw closed over the money and punched me on the biceps. Too hard. He winked back. "It's okay."

I rubbed my shoulder, marching off fast, and I counted my money. With my luck, I might have given the counterman's friend the five instead of one of the singles. But I hadn't. I now had \$6.68 left.

"I *still* think you're yellow," my voice said.

It was my voice, but it didn't come from me. There were no words, no feeling of words in my throat. It just came out of the air the way it always did.

I ran.

HAROLD R. THOMPKINS, 49, vice-president of Baysinger's, was found dead behind the store last night. His skull had been crushed by a vicious beating with

a heavy implement, Coroner McClain announced in preliminary verdict. Tompkins, who resided at 1467 Claremont, Edgeway, had been active in seeking labor-management peace in the recent difficulties . . .

I had read that a year before. The car cards on the clanking subway and the rumbling bus didn't seem nearly so interesting to me. Outside the van, a tasteful sign announced the limits of the village of Edgeway, and back inside, the monsters of my boyhood went *bloom*p at me.

I hadn't seen anything like them in years.

The slimy, scaly beasts were slithering over the newspaper holders, the ad card readers, the girl watchers as the neat little carbon-copy modern homes breezed past the windows.

I ignored the devils and concentrated on reading the withered, washed-out political posters on the telephone poles. My neck ached from holding it so stiff, staring out through the glass. More than that, I could feel the jabberwocks staring at me. You know how it is. You can feel a stare with the back of your neck and between your eyes. They got one brush of a gaze out of me.

The things abruptly started their business, trying to act casually as if they hadn't been waiting for me to look at them at all. They had a

little human being of some sort.

It was the size of a small boy, like the small boy who looked like me that they used to destroy when I was locked up with them in the dark. Except this was a man, scaled down to child's size. He had sort of an ugly, worried, tired, stupid look and he wore a shiny suit with a piece of a welcome mat or something for a necktie. Yeah, it was me. I really knew it all the time.

They began doing things to the midget me. I didn't even lift an eyebrow. They couldn't do anything worse to the small man than they had done to the young boy. It was sort of nostalgic watching them, but I really got bored with all that violence and killing and killing the same kill over and over. Like watching the Saturday night string of westerns in a bar.

The sunlight through the window was yellow and hot. After a time, I began to dose.

The shrieks woke me up.

For the first time, I could hear the shrieks of the monster's victim and listen to their obscene droolings. For the very first time in my life. Always before it had been all pantomime, like Charlie Chaplin. Now I heard the sounds of it all.

They say it's a bad sign when you start hearing voices.

I nearly panicked, but I held myself in the seat and forced myself to be rational about it. My own voice was always saying things

everybody could hear but which I didn't say. It wasn't any worse to be the *only* one who could hear other things I never said. I was as sane as I ever was. There was no doubt about that.

But a new thought suddenly impressed itself on me.

Whatever was punishing me for my sin was determined that I turn back before reaching 1467 Claremont.

"CLRMNT," the driver announced, sending the doors hissing open and the bus cranking to a stop.

I walked through the gibbering monsters, and passing the driver's seat, I heard my voice say, "Don't splatter me by starting up too soon, fat gut."

The driver looked at me with round eyes. "No, sir, I won't."

The monsters gave it up and stopped existing.

The bus didn't start until I was halfway up the block of sandine moderns and desk-size patios.

Number 1423 was different from the other houses. It was on fire.

One of the most beautiful women I've ever seen came running up to me. What black hair, what red lips, what sparkling eyes she had when I finally got up that far! "Sir," she said, "my baby brother is in there. I'd be so grateful—"

I grabbed for her. My hand went right on through. I didn't try grab-



bing her again. This time, I had a feeling I would feel her. I didn't want to be *that* bad off.

I walked on, ignoring the flames shooting out of 1423.

As I reached the patio of 1467, the flames stopped. It was a queer kind of break. No fadeout, just a stoppage. I took a step backward. No flames this time, but the very worst and very biggest monster of them all. Coming suddenly like that, it got to my spine and stomach, even though I was pretty used to them. I stepped away from it and it was gone.

Number 1467 was different from the other houses, and it wasn't even on fire. It was on two lots, and it had two picture windows, but only one little porch and front door. I guess even the well-to-do have a hard time finding big houses and good building sites and the right neighborhood. The trouble is so many people are well-to-do and there just aren't enough old manses to go around.

I strolled up the stucco path and lifted the wrought-iron knocker, which rang a bell.

The door opened and there was a girl there. She wasn't much compared to the one I put my hand through. But she was all right—brown hair, a nice face underneath the current shades of cosmetics, no figure for a stripper, but it would pass.

"You the maid?" I inquired.

"I am Miss Tompkins," she said.

"Oh. Any relation to Harold J. Tompkins?"

"My father. He died last year."

"Can I see your mother?"

"Mother died a few months after Daddy did."

"You'll do then."

I stepped inside. Miss Tompkins seemed too surprised to protest.

"I'm William Hagle," I said. "I want to help you."

"Mr. Hagle, whatever it is — insurance—"

"That's not it exactly," I told her. "I just want to help you. I only want to do whatever you want me to do."

She stared at me, her eyes moving too quickly over my face. "I've never even seen you before, have I? Why do you want to help me? How?"

"What's so damned hard to understand? I just want to help. I don't have any money, but I can work and give you my pay. You want me to clean up the basement, the *verrd*? Got any painting to be done? Hell, I can even sew. Anything — don't you understand — I'll do *anything* for you."

THE girl was breathing too hard now. "Mr. Hagle, if you're hungry, I can find something — no, I don't think there is anything. But I can give you some money to —"

"Damn it, I don't want your money! Here, I'll give you mine!" I

wadded up the \$6.38 cents I had left, plus one bus transfer, and put it on the top of a little bookcase next to the door. "I know it doesn't mean anything to you, but it's every penny I've got. Can't I do anything for you? Empty the garbage—"

"We have a disposal," she said automatically.

"Scrub the floors."

"There's a polisher in the closet."

"Make the beds!" I yelled. "You don't have a machine for *that*, do you?"

The corners of Miss Tompkins' eyes drew up and the corners of her mouth drew down. She stayed like that for a full second, then smiled a strange smile. "You — you saw me on the street." She was breathing her words now, so softly that I could only just understand them. "You thought I was — stacked."

"To tell the truth, ma'am, you aren't so—"

"Well, sit down. Don't go away. I'll just go into the next room — slip into something comfortable—"

"Miss Tompkins!" I grabbed hold of her. She felt real. I hoped she was. "I want nothing from you. Nothing! I only want to do something for you, anything for you. I've got to help you, can't you understand? **I KILLED YOUR FATHER.**"

I hadn't meant to tell her that, of course.

She screamed and began twist-

ing and clawing the way I knew she would as soon as I said it. But she stopped, stunned, as if I'd slapped her out of hysterics, only I'd never let go of her shoulders.

She hung then, her face empty, repeating, "What? *What?*"

Finally she began laughing and she pulled away from me so gently and naturally that I had to let go. She sank down and sat on top of my money on the little bookcase. She laughed some more into her two open hands.

I stood there, not knowing what to do with myself.

She looked up at me and brushed away a few tears with her fingertips. "You want to get *me* off of your conscience, do you, William Hagle? God, that's a good one." She reached out and took my hand in hers. "Come along down into the basement, William. I want to show you something. Afterward, if you want to — if you really want to — you may kill me."

"Thanks," I said.

I couldn't think of anything else to say.

DOWN in the basement, the machinery looked complex, with all sorts of thermostats and speedometers.

"Automatic stoker?" I asked.

"Time machine," she said.

"You don't mean a time machine like H. G. Wells's," I said, to show her I wasn't ignorant.

"Not exactly like that, but close," she answered sadly. "This has been the cause of all your trouble, William."

"It has?"

"Yes. This house and the ground around it are the Primary Focus area for the Hexers. The Hexers have tormented and persecuted you all your life. They got you into trouble. They made you think you were going crazy—"

"I never thought I was going crazy!" I yelled at her.

"That must have made it worse," she said miserably.

I thought about it. "I suppose it did. What are the Hexers? What — for the sake of argument — have they got against me?"

"The Hexers aren't human. I suppose they are extraterrestrials. No one ever told me. Maybe they are a kind of human strain that went different. I don't really know. They want different things than we do, but they can buy some of them with money, so they can be hired. People in the future hire them to hex people in the past."

"Why would anybody up ahead there with Buck Rogers want to cause me trouble? I'm dead then, aren't I?"

"Yes, you must be. It's a long time into the future. But, you see, some of my relatives there want to punish you for — it must be for killing Father. They lost out on a chain of inheritance because he

died when he did. They have money now, but they are bitter because they had to make it themselves. They can afford every luxury — even the luxury of revenge."

I suppose when you keep seeing





monsters and hearing yourself say things you didn't say, you can believe unusual things easier. I believed Miss Tompkins.

"It was not murder," I said. "I killed him by accident."

"No matter. They would hex you

if you had hit him with a car in a fog or given him the flu by sneezing in his face. I understand people are hexed all the time for things they never even knew they did. People up there have a lot of leisure, a lot of time to indulge their

every irritation or hate. I think it must be decadent, the way Rome was."

"What do you—and the machine—have to do with my hex?" I asked.

"This is the Primary Focus area, I told you. It's how the Hexers get into this time hypothesis. They can't get back into this Primary itself, but they can come and go through the outer boundary. It's hard to set up a Primary Focus — takes a tremendous drain of power. They broke through into the basement of the old house before I was born and Daddy was the first custodian of the machine. He never knew that he was helping avenge his own death. They let that slip later, after — it happened."

"Why did they come to you? Why did you help them?"

She turned half away. "The custodian is well paid. My relatives preferred the salary to go to someone in the family, instead of an outsider. Daddy accepted the offer and I've carried on the job."

"Paid? You were paid?"

She brushed at her eyes. "Oh, not in United States currency. But — Daddy got to be president of the store. It was set up so he could make a fortune that they could inherit. All he left was his insurance, and that went to mother. She died a few months later and some of it went to me and the rest to her relatives."

"You mean my life has been like

it has because some descendants of yours in the future hate me for an accident that deprived them of some money?"

SHE nodded enthusiastically. "You understand! And because I helped the Hexers they hired get to you. I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. Now" — she stopped to exhale — "do you want to kill me?"

"No, I don't want to kill you." I walked over and squinted at the machine. "Could I get into the future with this thing?"

"I don't know how you work the outer boundary. I think you need something else. There's an internal energy contact — you can talk to Communications." She raced through that. "You want to kill *them*, don't you? The Hexers and my relatives?"

"I don't want to kill anybody," I told her patiently. "I feel dirty just hearing how far some people can go for revenge. I just want them to let me alone. Why don't they kill me and get it over with?"

"They haven't a license to kill. Not yet. There's legislation going on."

"Listen," I said, listening to the idea coming into my head, "*listen*. These descendants of your mother's relatives — they *did* inherit money because your father died. Maybe they feel grateful to me. Maybe they would help me. Would

you help me try to talk to them?"

"Yes," Miss Tompkins said, and she used a dial on the machine.

It was as simple as putting through a phone call.

"We really understand your situation," Mr. Grimes-Tompkins said. "But it would take quite a bit to buy off the Hexers. However, we certainly appreciate the killing you made for us."

"Couldn't you buy off the Hexers, then, with some of the money I brought to your side of the family?" I asked.

"We don't appreciate it *that* much."

"What? You aren't going to pay him back for killing my father?" Miss Tompkins cried, outraged.

"Look," I said, "if you had some money of mine, would you pay off the Hexers for me? You do still use money up there, don't you?"

"We certainly do, young man. Just what did you have in mind?"

"If I gave you authorization now to use any assets I have in your time, would it be legal?"

"Declarations by temporal transmission? Yes, of course. Routine transaction."

"Take any money I have and use it to pay off the Hexers. Will you do it?"

"I don't see why not, since our ancestor seems to approve."

Miss Tompkins regarded me solemnly. "What do you intend to do, William?"

"Banks are out," I said, thinking hard. "They don't let inactive accounts go on drawing interest more than twenty years, or something like that. But government bonds don't have to be converted when they mature. One bond can pile up a fantastic amount of interest for them to collect."

"You have government bonds, William?"

"Not yet."

Miss Tompkins stood close to me. "I have plenty of money, William. I'll give it to you. You can buy bonds in my name."

"No. I'll get my own money."

"Shall I destroy the machine, William? Of course they'll only open another Focus—"

"No, you would just get yourself hexed too."

"What can I do, William?" she asked. "All along, ever since I was a little girl, I've known I've been helping to torture somebody. I didn't even know your name, William, but I helped torture you—"

"Because I killed your father."

"—and I've got to make it up to you. I'll give you everything, William, everything."

"Sure," I said, "to take me off your conscience. And if I take your offer and you get hexed, what happens to my conscience? Do we go around again — me working my tail off to raise the dough to get you unhexed, and you buying the Hexers off me? Where would it stop?"

We're even right now. Let's let it go at that."

"But, William, if we've taken, now we can give to each other."

She looked almost pretty then, and I wanted her the way I'd always wanted women. But I knew better. She wasn't going to get me into any trouble.

"No, thanks. Good-by."

I walked away from her.

For the first time, I could see what my life would be like if I wasn't hexed. Now I could realize that I knew how to do things right if I was only let alone.

THE intern took the blood smear. He reeled off a long string of questions about diseases I wasn't allowed to have.

"No," I said, "and I haven't given blood in the last thirty days."

He took my sample of blood and left.

I had to have eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents. They paid you twenty dollars a pint for blood here.

One government bond held for centuries would pile up a fortune in interest. The smallest bond you can buy is twenty-five dollars face value, and it costs eighteen seventy-five.

If I had kept that twenty, I would have had a buck and a quarter change. But if I hadn't have gotten cleaned up, the hospital might not have accepted me as a

donor at all. They had had some bad experiences from old bums dying from giving too often.

I only hoped I could force myself to let that bond go uncashed through the rest of my life.

The intern returned, his small mustache now pointing down. "Mr. Hagle, I have some bad news for you. Very bad. I hardly know how to tell you, but — you've got leukemia."

I nodded. "That means you won't take my blood." Maybe it also meant that I would never be allowed to have eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents in one lump again as long as I lived.

"No," the intern finally managed. "We can't accept your blood—"

I waved him off. "Isn't there some fund to take care of leukemia victims? Feed them, house them, send them to Florida to soak up the sun?"

"Certainly there is such a fund, and you may apply, Mr. Hagle."

"I'd certainly benefit a lot from that fund. Doctor, humor me. Test me again and see if I still have leukemia."

He did. I didn't.

"I don't understand this," the intern said, looking frightened. "Transitory leukemia? It must be a lab error."

"Will you buy my blood now?"

"I'm afraid as long as there is some doubt — this must be something new."

"I suppose it is," I told him. "I have all sorts of interesting symptoms."

"You do?" The intern was vitally interested. "Feel free to tell me all about them."

"I see and hear things."

"Really?"

"Do you believe in ESP?"

"I've sometimes wondered."

"Test me as much as you like. You'll find that in any game of chance, I score consistently far below the level of wins I should get by the law of averages. I'm psionically subnormal. And that's just the beginning."

"This must be *really* new," the intern said, eyes shining.

"It is," I assured him. "And listen, Doctor, you don't want to turn something like me over to your superiors, to leave me to the mercies of the A.M.A. This *can* be big, Doctor, *big*."

THEY offered Hagle's Disease to a lot of comedians, but finally it was the new guy, Biff Kelsey, that got it and made it his own. He did a thirty-hour telethon for Hagle's Disease.

Things really started to roll then. Boston coughed up three hundred thousand alone. The most touching contribution came from Carrville.

I plugged away on the employ-the-physically-handicapped theme and was made president of the

Foundation for the Treatment of Hagle's Disease. Dr. Wise (the intern) was the director.

So far, I had been living soft at Cedars, but I hadn't got my hands on one red cent. I wanted to get that government bond to buy off the Hexers, but at the same time it no longer seemed so urgent. They seemed to have given up, and were just sitting back waiting for their bribe.

One morning three months later, Doc Wise came worriedly into my room at the hospital.

"I don't like these reports, William," he said. "They all say there's nothing wrong with you."

"It comes and it goes," I said casually. "You saw some of the times when it came."

"Yes, but I'm having trouble convincing the trustees you weren't malingering. And, contrary to our expectations, no one else in the country seems to have developed Hagle's Disease."

"Stop worrying, Doc. Read the Foundation's charter. You have to treat Hagle's Disease, which means you can use that money to treat any disease of mine while we draw our salaries. I must have *something* wrong with me."

Wise shook his head. "Nothing. Not even dandruff or B.O. You are the healthiest man I have ever examined. It's *unnatural*."

Six months afterward, I had been walking all night in the park,

in the rain. I hadn't had anything to eat recently and I had fever and I began sneezing. The money was still in the bank — no, not in *my* name — I couldn't touch it; Miss Tompkins' descendants couldn't touch it — just waiting for me to —

I started running toward the hospital.

I slammed my fists against Wise's door. "Obed up, Wise. Id's be, Hagle. I god a cold. *That's* a disease, is'd it?"

Wise threw back the door. "What did you say?"

"I said 'Open up, Wise. It's me, Hagle. I've got a cold' . . . Never mind, Wise, never mind."

BUT you don't want to hear about all that. You want to know about what happened in the relief office. There's not much to tell.

I picked up the check from the guy's desk and looked at it. Nine fifty-seven to buy food for two weeks. I griped that it wasn't enough — not enough to keep alive on and save eighteen seventy-five clear in a lifetime.

The slob at the desk said, "What have you got to complain about? You got your health, don't you?"

That's when I slugged him and smashed up the relief office, and that's why the four cops dragged me here, and that's why I'm lying here on your couch telling you this story, Dr. Schultz.

I had my health, sure, but I finally figured out why. If you believe any of this, you're thinking that the Hexers must have laid off me, which is why I'm healthy. I thought so too, but how would that add up?

Look, I tried every way I could to raise eighteen seventy-five to buy a government bond. I never made it. I never made it because I wasn't *allowed* to.

But I didn't know it because I'd been euchred into the Foundation for the Treatment of Hagle's Disease. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, all earmarked for one purpose only — treating my disease — and I haven't got any!

Or maybe you're figuring the way I did, that senility is a disease, and all I have to do is wait for it to creep up on me so I can get some of that Foundation money. But the Hexers have that fixed too, I'll bet. I'm not sure, but I think I'm going to live for centuries without a sick day in my life. In other words, I'm going to live that life out as poor as I am right now!

It's a fantastic story, Doctor, but you believe me, don't you? You *do* believe every word of it. You *have* to, Doctor!

Because a persecution complex is kind of a disease and I'd have to be treated for it.

Now will you let me out of this jacket so I can smoke a cigarette?

— JIM HARMON

The Snowmen

By FREDERIK POHL

After the snow job this guy

handed us, what else should

we give him but the freeze?

Illustrated by WOOD

TANDY said: "Not tonight, Howard. Why, I'm practically in bed already. See?" And she flipped the vision switch just for a second, long enough so I could get a glimpse of a sheer negligee and feathered slippers and, well, naturally, I couldn't quite believe that she *really* wanted me to stay away. Nobody had made her flip that switch.

I said: "Just for a minute, Tan-

dy. One drink. A little music, maybe just one dance—"

"Howard, you're *terrible*."

"No, dearest," I said, fast and soft and close to the phone, "I'm not terrible, I'm only very much in love. Don't say no. Don't say a word. Just close your eyes, and in ten minutes I'll be there, and—"

And then, confound them, they had to start that yapping. *Bleep-bleep* on the phone, and then:

"Attention all citizens! Stand by for orders! Your World Federal Government has proclaimed a state of unlimited emergency. All heatpump power generators in excess of eight horsepower per—"

I slammed down the phone in disgust. The lousy Feds! Yack-yack on the phone lines at all hours of the day and night, no consideration for anybody. I was disgusted, and then, when I got to thinking, not so disgusted. Why not go right over? She hadn't said no; she hadn't had a chance.

So I got the Bug out, locked the doors and set the thermostats, and I set out.

IT isn't two miles to Tandy's place. Five years ago, even, I could make it in three or four minutes; now it takes ten. I call it a damned shame, though no one else seems to care. But I've always been more adventurous than most, and more social-minded.

Jeffrey Otis wouldn't care about things like that. Ittel du Bois wouldn't even know — his idea is to bury his nose in a drama-tape when he goes out of the house, let the Bug drive itself.

But not me. I like to drive, even if you can't see anything and the autopilot is perfectly reliable. Life is for *living*, I say. *Live* it.

I don't pretend to understand this scientific stuff either — leave science to the people who like it

is another thing I say. But you know how when you're in your Bug and you've set the direction-finder for somebody's place, there's this *beepbeepbeepbeep* when you're going right and a *beepSQUAWK* or a *SQUAWK-beep* when you go off the track? It has something to do with radio, only not radio — that's out of the question now, they say — but with sort of telephoned messages through the magma of the Earth's core. Well, that's what it says in the manual, and I know because one day I glanced through it.

Anyway. Excuse me for getting technical. But I was going along toward Tandy's place, my mind full of warm pleasures and anticipating, and suddenly the *beepbeepbeep* stopped and there was a sort of crystal chime and then a voice: "Attention! Operation of private vehicles is forbidden! Return to your home and listen to telephoned orders every hour on the hour!" And then the *beepbeepbeep* again. Why, they'd even learned how to jam the direction-finder with their confounded yapping!

It was very annoying and angrily I snapped the DF off. Daring? Yes, but I have to say that I'm an excellent driver, wonderful sense of direction, hardly need the direction-finder in the first place. And anyway we were close; the thermal pointers in the nose



had already picked up Tandy's temperature gradient.

Tandy opened the locks herself. "Howard," she said in soft surprise, clutching the black film of negligee. "You really came. Oh, naughty Howard!"

"My darling!" I breathed, reaching out for her. But she dodged.

"No, Howard," she said severely, "you mustn't do that. Sit down for a moment. Have one little drink. And then I'm going to have to be terribly stubborn and send you right home, dear."

"Of course," I said, because that was, after all, the rules of the game. "Just one drink, certainly."

BUT, damn it, she seemed to mean it! She wasn't a bit hospitable — I mean not *really* hospitable. She seemed friendly enough and she talked sweetly enough, but—

Well, for example, she sat in the positively-not chair.

I can tell you a lot about the way Tandy furnished her place. There's the wing chair by the fire, and that's a bad sign because the arms are slippery and there's only room for one actually sitting in it. There's the love seat — speaks for itself, doesn't it? And there's the big sofa and, best of all, the bearskin rug. But way at the other end of the scale is this perfectly straight armless cane-bottomed thing, with a Ming vase on one

side of it and a shrub of some kind or other rooted in a bowl on the other, and that's where she sat.

I grumbled: "I shouldn't have come at all."

"What, Howard?"

"I said, uh, 'I couldn't come any, uh, faster.' I mean I came as fast as I could."

"I know you did, you brute," she said roguishly, and stopped the Martini-mixer.

It poured us each a drink.

"Now don't dawdle," she said primly. "I've got to get some sleep."

"To love," I said, and sipped the top off the Martini.

"Don't do that," she warned.

I got up from the floor at her feet and went back to another chair.

"You," she said, "are a hard man to handle, Howard dear." But she giggled.

Well, you can't win them all. I finished my drink and figured I would hang around about five minutes just to show who was boss and then get back in the Bug and go home. It had been a wearing day, hours and hours with the orchids, and then listening to all nine Beethoven symphonies in a row while I had played solitaire. Frankly, I was a little sleepy after a day like that and home was where I wanted to be just then.

But I heard the annunciator bell tinkle.

I stared at Tandy.

"My," she said prettily, "I wonder who that can be?"

"Tandy!"

She shrugged. "Probably someone dull. I won't answer. Now do be a good boy and—"

"Tandy! How *could* you?" My mind raced; there was only one conclusion. "Tandy, do you have Ittel du Bois coming here tonight? Don't lie to me!"

"Howard, what a *terrible* thing to say. Ittel was *last* year."

"Tell me the truth!"

"I *told* you the truth!"

And she was angry. I'd hurt her, no doubt of it.

"Then it must be Jeffrey. I won't stand for it. I won the toss fair and square. Why can't he wait until next year? It isn't *decent*. I—"

She stood up, her blue eyes smoldering. "Howard McGuiness, you'd better go before you say something I couldn't forgive."

I stood my ground. "Then who is it?"

"Oh, *darn* it!" she said, and kicked viciously at the shrub by her left foot. "See for yourself! Answer the door."

SO I did. Now I know Ittel du Bois's Bug and I know Jeff Otis's. It wasn't either one of them. The vehicle outside Tandy's door parked next to mine was a very strange-looking Bug indeed. For one thing, it was only about eight feet long.

A bank of infra-red lamps glowed on it, bathing it in heat. The caked ice that forms in the dead spots along the hull, behind the treads and so on melted, plopped off, turned into water and ran into the drain grille. You know how a Bug will crack and twang when it's being warmed up? They all do.

This one didn't.

It didn't make a sound. It was so silent that I could hear the snip-snip of Tandy's automatic load adjuster, throwing another heatpump into circuit to meet the drain of the infra-red lamps. But no sound from the Bug outside. Also it didn't have caterpillar treads. Also it had — well, you can believe this or not — it had windows.

"You see?" said Tandy, in a voice colder than the black sky full of stars overhead. "Now would you like to apologize to me?"

"I apologize," I said in a voice that hardly got past my lips. "I—" I stopped and swallowed. I begged, "Please, Tandy, what is it?"

She lit a cigarette unsteadily. "Well, I don't rightly know. I'm kind of glad you're here, Howard," she confessed. "Maybe I shouldn't have tried to get rid of you."

"Tell me!"

She glanced at the Bug. "All right. I'll make it fast. I got a call from this, uh, fellow. I couldn't understand him very well. But—"

She looked at me sidewise.

"I get it," I said. "You thought he might be a mark."

She nodded.

"And you wouldn't cut me in!" I cried angrily. "Tandy, that's downright mean! When I found old Buchmayr dead, didn't I cut you in on looting his place? Didn't I give you first pick of everything you wanted — except heatpumps and machine patterns, of course?"

"I know, dear," she said miserably, "but — hush! He's coming out."

She was looking out the window. I looked too.

And then we looked at each other. That fellow out of the strange Bug, he was as strange as his vehicle. He might be a mark or he might not, but of one thing I was pretty sure — he had huge white eyes and a serpentine frill of orange tendrils instead of hair.

At once all my lethargy and weariness vanished.

"Tandy," I cried, "he isn't human!"

"I know," she whispered.

"But don't you know what this means? He's an alien! He must come from another planet. — perhaps from another star. Tandy, this is the most important thing that ever happened to us."

I thought fast.

"Tell you what," I said. "You let him in while I get around the side shaft — it's defrosted."

I hurried. At the side door, I stopped and looked at her affectionately.

"Dear Tandy," I said. "And you thought this was just an ordinary mark. You see? You *need* me."

And I was off, leaving her that thought to chew on as she welcomed her visitor.

I TOOK a good long time in the stranger's Bug. Whether he was a human or a monster, I could rely on Tandy to keep him occupied, so I was very thorough, and didn't rush, and came out with a splendid supply of what seemed to be storage batteries. I couldn't quite make them out, but I was sure that power was in them somehow or other, and if there was power, the heatpump would find a way to suck it out. Those I took the opportunity of tucking away in my own Bug before I went back in Tandy's place. No use bothering her about them.

She was sitting in the wing chair and the stranger was nowhere in sight. I raised my brows. She nodded.

"Well," I said, "he was your guest. I won't interfere."

Tandy was looking quiet, relaxed and happy. "What about the Bug?"

"Oh, lots of things," I said. "Plenty of metal! And food — a lot of food, Tandy. Of course, we'll have to go easy on it, till we find

out if we can digest it, but it smells delicious. And—"

"Pumps?" she demanded.

"Funny," I said. "They don't seem to use them." She scowled. "Honestly, dearest! You can see for yourself — everything I found is piled right outside the door."

"What isn't in your Bug, you mean."

"Tandy!"

She glowered a moment longer, then smiled like the Sun bursting through clouds on an old video tape. "No matter, Howard," she said tenderly, "we've got plenty. Let's have another Martini."

"Of course." I waited and took the glass. "To love," I toasted. "And to crime. By the way, did you talk to him first?"

"Talk to him?" she said crossly. "Yap, yap, on and on. He was as bad as the Feds."

I got up and idly walked across the room to the light switch. "Did he say anything interesting?"

"Not very. He spoke a terribly poor grade of English, to begin with. Said he learned it off old radio broadcasts, of all things. They float around forever out in space, it seems."

I switched off the lights. "That better?"

She nodded drowsily, got up to refill her glass, and sat down again in the love seat. "He was awfully interested in the heatpumps," she murmured.

I put a tape on the player — Tschaikowsky. Tandy is a fool for violins. "He liked them?"

"Oh, in a way. He thought they were clever. But dangerous, he said."

"Him and the Feds." I sat down next to her. Click-click and our individual body armor went on standby alert. At the first hostile move, it would block us off, set up a force field — well, I *think* it's called a force field. "The Feds are always yapping about the pumps too. Did I tell you? They're even cutting in on the RDF channels."

"Oh, Howard! That's too much." She sat up and got another drink and sat, this time, on the wide, low sofa. She giggled.

"What's the matter, dear?" I asked, coming over beside her.

"He was so *funny*. Ya-ta-ta-ta, ya-ta-ta-ta, all about how the heat-pumps were ruining the world."

"Just like the Feds."

CLICK-CLICK some more, as I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Just like," she agreed. "He said it was evidently extremely high technology that produced a device that took heat out of its surrounding ambient environment, but had we ever thought of what would happen when *all* the heat was gone?"

"Crazy," I whispered into the base of her throat.

"Absolutely. As though all the heat could ever be gone! Absolute zero, he called it — said we're only eight or ten degrees from it now. That's why the snow, he said." I made a sound of polite disgust. "Yes, that's what he said. He said it wasn't just snow, it was frozen air — oxygen and nitrogen and all those things. We've frozen the Earth solid, he said, and now it's so shiny that its libido is nearly perfect."

I sat up sharply, then relaxed. "Not libido, dear. Albedo. That means it's shiny."

"That's what he said. He said the Feds were right . . . Howard. Howard, dear. Listen to me."

"Ssh," I murmured. "Did he say anything else?"

"But Howard! Please! You're—" "Ssh."

She relaxed, and then in a moment giggled again. "Howard, wait. I forgot to tell you the funniest part."

It was irritating, but I could afford to be patient. "What was that, dearest?"

"He didn't have any personal armor!"

I sat up. I couldn't help it. "What?"

"None at all! Unarmored as a baby. So that proves he isn't human, doesn't it? I mean, if he can't take the simplest care of himself, he's only a kind of animal, right?"

I thought. "Well, I suppose so," I said.

"Good," she said, "because he's, well, in the freezer. I didn't want to waste him, Howard. And it isn't as if he was human."

I thought for another second. Well, why not? You get tired of mushroom steaks, and since there hasn't been any open sky for pasturing for centuries now, that's about all there is. Now that I thought back on it, he looked kind of plump and appetizing at that.

And, in any case, that was a problem for later on.

I reached out idly and touched the button that controlled the last light in the room, the electric fireplace itself.

"Oh," I said, pausing. "Where did he come from?"

"Sorry," her muffled voice came. "I forgot to ask."

I REACHED out thoughtfully and found my glass. There was a little bit left; I drained it off.

Funny that the creature should bother to come down. In the old days, yes, back when Earth was full of people, you might expect aliens to come rocketing down from the stars and all that. But he'd come all the way from — well, from wherever — and for what? Just to make a little soup for the pot, to donate a little metal and power. It was funny, in a way.

I couldn't help thinking that the Feds would have liked to have met him. Not only because he agreed with them about the pumps and so on, but because they're interested in things like that. They're very earnest types—that's why they're issuing warnings and so on. Of course, nobody pays any attention.

Still—

Well, there was no sense bother-

ing my brain about that sort of stuff, was there? If the heatpumps were dangerous, nobody would have bothered to invent them, would they?

Of course not.

I set down my glass and switched off the fireplace. Tandy was still and warm beside me, motionless but, believe me, by no means asleep.

—FREDERIK POHL

★ ★ FORECAST ★ ★

The lead story in the next issue may surprise us as much as you. As of even date, Robert Sheckley, whose ingenious "Prospector's Special" is on display in this issue, has promised a novella (no title yet) for the February issue (on sale toward the end of November, as previously explained, because the book must come off sale before the cover date or be yanked from the shelves by the newsdealers prematurely). The odds are better than good that the Sheckley novella will 1) be delivered on time, for Sheckley warms chilled editorial hearts by meeting his deadlines, and 2) will be a sparkler, for Sheckley lights glazed editorial eyes by making his themes work with freshness and resourcefulness.

On the other hand, Sheckley speeds through New York traffic on a motor scooter, is addicted to sailboats, the small kind that are the first to get storm warnings, which he buoyantly ignores, and has other lethal hobbies that keep taut editorial nerves jangling . . .

As a safeguard, therefore, we are scheduling a long novelet by Frederik Pohl with this enchanting title: THE DAY THE ICICLE WORKS CLOSED. Sheckley yes or Sheckley no, this story will run, and it is about a plant that manufactures icicles, and for no capricious reason either, and what happens when the factory shuts down makes an entertaining, mind-prodding yarn.

What happens to the rest of the issue is another story. The Sheckley and the Pohl might possibly join out other novelets — but allow more shorts. Or if the Sheckley is delayed for one nervous reason or another, that would cut down shorts — but allow more novelets.

Either way, it will be a good issue, especially in view of what Willy Ley has done with ONE PLANET — ONE LANGUAGE, and the numerous equally exciting sub-sections of his department, which incidentally includes a puzzle that ought to enliven as many living rooms as his noted Australian Shae Size Riddle did, not long ago.



GALAXY'S

5 Star Shelf

ALAS, BABYLON by Pat Frank.
J. B. Lippincott Co., Phila., \$3.50

POST-H-BOMB futures, once the ground of the SF author, has since been poached upon by mainstream authors like Cloete, Shute and now Frank. However, Frank also has a pre-H-Bomb novel under his belt, the excellent *Forbidden Area*.

He lives in Central Florida, making foregone his choice of locale. Survival in that region, though hard, looks too easy. Also, his prime assumption — radiation and fallout are deadly only in or to the immediate windward of impact

areas — is open to fierce rebuttal based on continuing investigation.

As a post-Bomb Swiss Family Robinson-type adventure, the story is fine, but my impression is that Frank stopped too soon with too little.

Rating: ★★★

IMMORTALITY DELIVERED
by Robert Sheckley. Avalon Books, N.Y., \$2.75

HAD SHECKLEY never written *Time Killer*, the deservedly popular serial seen in these pages, the above novel would have created something of a stir. However, the

plot changes engineered by the publisher have compelled Sheckley to divorce himself completely from the book. Motivations have been altered and even the roles played by the principle characters have been tampered with, so that the story is unrecognizable except in its broadest outlines.

There is no doubt in my mind that Sheckley has a right to object: the yarn gained nothing and lost much in its metamorphosis. However, his superbly imaginative story of a society with a for-real Hereafter has far too much internal brilliance to be dimmed completely.

Rating: ★★★

STARSHIP by Brian Aldiss. Criterion Books, N.Y., \$3.50

HEINLEIN'S FULL-BLOWN prototype, *Universe*, set the pattern for interstellar stories in which several lifetimes are spent in travel. Destination is forgotten, superstition and myths prevail, and culture is subordinated to survival.

English author Aldiss's ship, homebound from Procyon V, is a derelict from some ancient catastrophe, though automatic functions remain intact. Its survivors, banded into antagonistic tribes and hunting their food in hydroponic jungles that choke the passageways, remind one of C. R.

Tanner's *Tumithak of the Corridors* of many years past.

The shock ending, though sufficiently clued, is abrupt and leaves so much unanswered that it must lose a full star in rating. A pity—it has a good deal else to add in exploring this highly provocative theme.

Rating: ★★★½

LOST IN SPACE by George O. Smith. Avalon Books, N.Y., \$2.75

PLOT-WISE and dialogue-wise, Smith's 1954 opus is buffed to a high luster. Action flows easily and scenes change three ways without hitch or jerk from the derelict lifeboat with its three maroonees, to the space fleet of 250 vessels engaged in systematic search for the above, to the flagship of an overwhelmingly superior alien battle fleet.

The aliens, about to make their first contact with Earth culture, are secretly observing the rescue operation, with belligerence or peace in the balance, based on their assay of humanity.

A topnotch space opera — right up to the final half-dozen pages, at which point Smith and logic part company.

Rating: ★★★

STARMAN'S QUEST by Robert Silverberg. Gnome Press, N.Y., \$3.00

SILVERBERG MIGHT have called his book *I Was A Three-Hundred-Year-Old Teenager*, for this paradox is the basis of Alan Donnell's quest: due to the vagaries of the Fitzgerald Contraction, spacers are pariahs, hated for their seeming longevity. They are restricted to ghettos by the overcrowded planet dwellers during their infrequent planet-falls, and subject to lifelong tedium and routine in space.

A faster-than-light drive is an obvious must for interstellar travel if an even deeper schism is to be avoided. Donnell's quest leads him to jump ship in an attempt to rediscover the invention of a man a millenium dead. Exciting story ingredients abound, but too many happenstances and line-of-least-resistance writing steal too much of its effectiveness.

Rating: ★★★

DAY OF THE GIANTS by Lester del Rey. Avalon Books, N.Y., \$2.75

NORSE SAGAS are almost uniformly abrim with doom. With such working material, writing a light fantasy is a tough chore. Seemingly aware of this, del Rey plunges through his story in lickety-split fashion — let gods and giants alike fall where they may.

His yarn concerns *Ragnarok*, the twilight of the gods, with gods

and giants fated to join final combat with Earth as prize. To help swing the balance, Yankee twins of Norse descent are transported to the abode of the gods, Asgard, to augment their puny magic with modern technology.

Rating: ★★

THE PATH OF UNREASON by George O. Smith. Gnome Press, Hicksville, N.Y., \$3.00

SINCE A LOT of salt does not taste better than enough salt, it also follows that expanding Smith's idea from a novelet does not, per se, increase its interest. This is a story that Smith evidently had a lot of fun writing but that the reader will find more difficult to enjoy. The struggle of the physicist hero, barely returned from the brink of insanity, to convince his psychiatrist that Earth is suffering under alien rule, is truly frustrating.

The reader is kept constantly guessing, but much of Smith's evidence and clues are so unfair that he engenders a suspension of willing belief. Too bad — Smith was within hailing distance of a good yarn, comparable to his *Highways in Hiding*.

Rating: ★★

VIRGIN PLANET by Poul Anderson. Avalon Books, N.Y., \$2.75

THOUGH MEANT to be a light-hearted farce, *Virgin Planet* belies its initial interest and winds up taking its theme quite seriously. The idea of a solitary male explorer landing on a true virgin planet of true virgin human females, cast away for three hundred years, promises some pretty obvious fun. Anderson has it — as well as going into the hows and whys.

Rating: ★★★

(All books in the Avalon SF series have plastic dust jackets—excellent and practical book savers.)

SCAVENGERS IN SPACE by Alan E. Nourse. David McKay Co., Inc., N.Y., 2.75

DR. NOURSE'S juvenile is in the very best tradition of youthful science adventure. The action is plentiful and quick-paced, the dialogue authentic; the science unobtrusive but well grounded; black is jet and white is alabaster.

While mining in the Asteroid Belt, an ex-employee of a ruthless giant mining corporation has evidently struck a bonanza and been murdered, non-evidently, by company agents. The secret of the strike's location dies with him, though, and his twin sons and former partner rocket into the Belt for the dual purposes of revenge and re-discovery of the

claim. The nature of the find and its secret location are equal surprises.

Rating, for youngsters: ★★★★★

THE MARCH OF ARCHEOLOGY by C. W. Ceram. Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., \$15.00

THIS BEAUTIFUL hunk of book is as important an archeological find as any that fill its pages.

Written by the author of the fantastically successful *Gods, Graves & Scholars*, it contains much material from the former, but differs entirely in its uncomplicated approach to the science — as well as overflowing with some of the most enthralling photos and reproductions to be seen between covers.

BRIGHTER THAN A THOUSAND SUNS by Robert Jungk. Harcourt, Brace & Co., N.Y., \$5.00

SUBTITLED a personal history of the atomic scientists, this is more than that. Difficult reading at times, it still is most rewarding to the student of recent atomic history, even though this true material reads almost like fiction.

THE SACRED MUSHROOM by Andrija Puharich. Doubleday & Co., Inc., N.Y., \$4.50

WHILE ENGAGED in psi re-

search, Dr. Puharich encountered the myth of the sacred mushroom, purportedly used by the ancient Egyptians and others to send the mind through time and space. Dr. Puharich's deductions from information supplied by an entranced subject are not easy to follow.

Whether you will want to depends on your interest in parapsychology, its experimental techniques and conclusions.

RAYS by Fred Reinfeld. Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., N.Y., \$3.50

VIBRATIONS, WAVES and particles qualify under the catch-all "ray" category. SF has long outgrown its Ray Period, so the objective is no longer subjective. Reinfeld's illuminating text is complemented by liberal photographic coverage.

JUNIOR EDUCATION CORNER

EXPLORING THE PLANETS by Roy A. Gallant. Garden City Books, N.Y., \$2.95

THE COMMON denominator of Gallant's books has been the utter beauty of the illustrations plus a forthright text. His present book covers the Solar System planet by planet, fact by fact, very clearly and readably.

THE TOOLS OF SCIENCE by Irving Adler. The John Day Co., N.Y., \$3.00

AS THE theoretical and practical sciences become more complicated, so do their tools. Often these tools take fantastic shapes — witness the giant grid of the radio telescope — and others would never be thought of as tools by the layman at all.

Adler handles this aspect of the sciences in absorbing, understandable fashion.

THE EXPLORATION OF TIME by R. C. N. Bowen. Philosophical Library, N.Y., \$6.00

OF ALL animals, only man is consciously aware that there is more to time than right now. However, the concept of geologic time was greatly foreshortened only a century back. Our longer view has been due to dating methods: radioactivity, sedimentation, chemical, astrophysical, etc.

Amazingly, improved methodology has increased the age of the Earth from mere millions to upward of four billion years — and decreased the age of man from a theoretical one million to under seventy-five thousand!

Time spent in this exploration of time is time well spent.

— FLOYD C. GALE

SABBATICAL

BY ROBERT BLOCH

*This was cornball, strictly from
Squaresville — the Mad Scientist
bit — but dig this cat's pajamas!*

(Excerpt from Yardley University Daily Bulletin, April 1, 1925) Professor Herbert Claymore, head of the Physics Department, announced today that he is leaving on a brief sabbatical. During his absence, Professor Claymore's classes will be conducted by Dr. Potter.

IT was quarter past eight Martinis in the little bar across the street and just down the block from Television City. This was subjective time, of course, but then Don Freeman always ran on subjective time, and didn't everybody, when you came right down to it?

Right down to eight Martinis, that is?

Don didn't know, but he was willing to argue the point with all comers.

And the big trouble right now was that there weren't any comers. Apparently Rosalie wasn't going to show up after all, and nobody else

Illustrated by FINLAY



in this neon-lighted nothing was worth talking to. In just a little while, Don realized, it was going to get very drunk in here. And he'd wind up talking to the bartender again.

That was bad. But going home would be still worse. Besides, you can't go home again. Thomas Wolfe had said that, and it was a pretty perceptive remark, coming from a guy who hadn't even been married.

Don drained his drink and extended the empty glass. "Alms, for the love of Allah," he said.

The bartender did his duty.

Somebody nudged Don's shoulder and stepped on his foot, hard.

"Be my guest," Don muttered, but moved down to the end of the bar. It was crowded in here — you couldn't hear yourself drink. Of course, that was the one great advantage, wasn't it? You also couldn't hear yourself think. And if you pressed your luck (and your drinks), after a time you couldn't *feel* yourself think, either—to think about Rosalie and the house and the job without feeling any pain or any remorse. Or not to think about them at all.

And the time was now, or at least only a Martini or two away. Soon he'd be able to forget that Rosalie was only a two-bit chirp who'd fluttered into his cage hoping to find a perch on one of the agency's shows. He'd forget about going home, too — going home to

Beverly and Pat and Michael. Not that there was anything wrong with them, really. It was just that every second guy his age seemed to be married to a girl named Beverly (or Shirley, or Susan) and they all had two kids named Pat and Michael.

AS for forgetting the job, that was the real bonus deal. Funny how he'd wanted it once — full credit listing as executive producer on *Playlights*. But now that he was boss man, it was just another headache; fighting the client, fighting the network, fighting the talent and the no-talent they sent him, fighting the hacks who kept on sending him the same three lousy scripts, over and over again.

There was the one about the girl recovering from a nervous breakdown who gets into a bind where she thinks she's committed a murder — only her doctor uncovers the real killer, and so they get married. There was the one about the pilot or the racer or the gunfighter who loses his nerve until the chips are down, and then he comes through. And there was the one about the young guy who has to choose between crass commercialism or personal integrity, and guess what he does!

Don hated this last script worst of all. Maybe it was because he lived it. And his blonde wife hadn't made the big renunciation speech

about preferring financial poverty to spiritual poverty, and he hadn't played the climactic scene where he was supposed to walk out on the boss and turn to honest creative labor.

So now he was a big man, a real live producer and everything, and he was entitled to sit in a noisy bar on his night off and order another Martini.

He held out his glass to the bartender once again. "Cloud Nine," he said.

Again he felt himself being shoved out of the way. Half of Television City was in here tonight — production people, musicians, agency men, even a gaggle of actors in full makeup for night dress rehearsals. If he wanted to, he could find plenty of people to talk to. But what was the use? They were here for the same reason he was here, most of them; they had their own troubles. Some day he'd write a story about the TV industry and its eventual collapse due to internal tensions. *The Fall of the House of Ulcer*.

But not tonight. Not right now. Because here was the drink, and maybe he'd better find himself a booth in back where he could nurse it without spilling the life-giving fluid all over a twenty-dollar Sulka tie.

Don spotted the empty in back, floated over to it, slid in. He was already seated when he realized the

booth wasn't empty. There was an elderly man sitting across from him, nursing a beer.

"Sorry," Don said. "I didn't notice—"

"Quite all right," the elderly man told him, "I don't mind company."

Don eyed him, doing a quick job of type-casting.

THE man was in his late fifties and looked a bit like Parker Fennelly; one of those New England characters. It wasn't a makeup job either, although he was obviously an actor escaped from rehearsal, because he was wearing a costume. He had on a black double-breasted suit with wide lapels; a celluloid collar rode above his white shirt; a string tie twined with the ribbon of his pince-nez.

"The Old Professor, eh?" Don murmured.

The man raised his eyebrows. "But that's remarkable," he said. "How on Earth did you recognize me?"

"Simple." Don tapped his glass. "*In vino veritas*." He leaned forward. "That's the motto of MGM, you know."

The man looked puzzled.

"Don't mind me," Don told him. "I've just come from my meteorologist and he tells me I'm a little under the weather."

"But you *did* recognize me—"

"Of course. How could I possibly forget old — old —"

"Herbert Claymore."

"Sure! Herb Claymore, as I live and breed! The last of the big-time spenders! What are you doing here — the Mad Scientist bit?"

The man lifted his beer glass. "Please. Not so loud." He drank slowly, then looked up. "But how could you know? I mean, you must have been a mere child when you saw me. How old are you now, might I ask?"

"Thirty-four," Don told him.

"Then it's utterly impossible. You wouldn't even have been born."

"I was born, all right," Don said. "I can show you my navel to prove it."

"You're intoxicated."

"Isn't everybody? What did you come here for?"

"Merely to study."

"Getting up on your lines, eh? Well, don't let me stop you. I'm about ready to go, anyway."

"No, please stay. I was hoping to find someone to talk to. And you intrigue me. I mean, I didn't expect anyone to recognize me."

"Not recognize Herb Claymore, the man who rocked the scientific world with his achievements! They mocked you, ridiculed you, laughed you out of court. But were you discouraged? No! You forged ahead, pushing back the boundaries of discovery past Preparation H, into Preparation I, even Preparation J—"

"Just who are you, sir?"

"Don Freeman is the name. Or as I put it to the young ladies of my acquaintance, Don Freeman, at your service."

"It isn't familiar. And yet you seem to know."

"I do. I do."

"Is it because of my clothing?"

DON nodded. "That Hoover collar would give anybody away."

"Hoover collar?" The man paused. "Ah, yes, Herbert Hoover, the chap who headed Belgian Relief during the War."

"President Hoover," Don corrected.

"Is he?"

"Not any more. But back in 1929—"

"Sorry. That was after my time."

"After?"

"Four years. I left in '25."

"Did you now? And what else is new?"

"Why, everything! I just arrived, and I must confess the changes are more startling than I'd anticipated. The very ground on which the university stood is now occupied by this television installation, and—"

"Come off it, Claymore. You're laying a bomb."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Very unfunny. We are not amused."

"I assure you, I'm quite serious."

Don focused on him briefly.

"This isn't a rib? You aren't a fugitive from the Guild?"

"I am not a fugitive in any sense of the word, sir. I am a visitor."

"You, Herbert Claymore, came here in a time machine from the year 1925?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Don sighed slowly. "Then I, Don Freeman, need another drink. In a manner of speaking, God, yes!"

He waved to the bartender.

"The same?" the bartender inquired.

"No. Switch me to a Miltown Special." He peered at his companion. "How about you?"

"What is a Miltown Special?"

"It's just like an ordinary Martini, only there's a tranquilizer in the olive."

"Well—"

"Come on. I'll bet you couldn't get one back where you came from. Why, they still had Prohibition, didn't they?"

"Indeed, yes." Claymore looked up at the bartender. "The same."

The bartender left.

"No kidding," Don muttered. "From 1925, eh? Just like that."

"Not 'just like that,' as you put it. I spent eighteen years perfecting the *modus operandi*. Steinmetz and Edison gave me the courtesy of a hearing, but nobody else was interested in my work."

"Not even Einstein?"

"You refer to Albert Einstein, the German mathematician? I

never met the gentleman. You see, I haven't traveled abroad."

THE bartender set their drinks before them and Don signed the tab.

"You're serious about this gag, huh?" said Don. "Time traveling. What a ball! Why'd you come here, of all places?"

"I thought the university was still in existence," Claymore explained. "Now I learn it disappeared during the — ah — Depression, I believe they called it."

"Depression. I'm an authority on Depressions, particularly my own," Don said. "Depressions, ruts, graves. Deep stuff."

"But this seems a wonderful era."

"Is it? Look, I'll swap you even. You stay here, I go back to 1925. As long as we're kicking the routine around for laughs, I mean."

"It wouldn't be fair," Claymore told him. "That was a barbaric era."

"I can see you haven't read the papers," Don answered. "Maybe they don't have newsboys at the asylum."

"Sir, I must ask you to—"

"All right, no offense. But anyone who likes the way things are today must be crazy. Just look at the situation—cold war, union scandals, fallout, conformity, space race, alphabet bombs, why Johnny can't read, security, censorship, anti-segregation troubles. It's murder!"

"I fail to see that it's any worse than what I left behind me," said Claymore. "In 1925 we had the Bolshevik menace, the Teapot Dome scandal, and bootlegging. As for censorship — what about Prohibition? What about this law down in Tennessee forbidding the teaching of evolution in the schools? Anti-segregation troubles? Haven't you heard about lynching? And as for murder, our papers are full of Al Capone."

"Aw right awready," Don said. "So let's play the flip side. Have you been around long enough to notice rock-'n'-roll, Presley, the tail-fin cars, the lousy ads, the crummy movies? *Will Success Spoil Frankenstein's Monster* — now I ask you!"

Claymore sipped his drink. "I've heard your rock-'n'-roll, as you call it, and your Mr. Presley. But have you ever heard voh-doh-dee-oh-doh songs, or *Yes, We Have No Bananas*? Have you ever tried to drive a Model T over a corduroy road during a rainstorm? Do your advertising tycoons ever ask the immortal question, *Why Wear a Truss*? And as for motion pictures, I submit the epic productions starring Mae Murray, Gilda Gray, and the cast-of-ten-thousand dramas of Cecil B. de Mille." He smiled. "At least you enjoy the benefit of modern technology."

"Sure. Air-conditioning, television, supermarkets, automatic

washers. Also guided missiles, and the deadliest weapon of all, the income tax."

"Which we also had."

DON drank around his olive. "So it's a Mexican standoff. But let's consider the really *important* things. Like the crowded housing conditions that ruin our metropolitan areas, and the gray flannel straitjackets we wear, and the women we love — those big-busted, women we love — those big-busted, bleached-blonde, bird-brained beauties."

"Very well." Claymore smiled. "I'll match today's housing with 1925 tenements. Did you know that only half of the homes boasted bathtubs, and less than half had inside plumbing? I needn't say anything about our atrociously uncomfortable furniture. And as for clothing, I needn't say anything about *that*, either. Just look at what I'm wearing as compared to your garments."

"Never mind the small talk," Don interrupted. "Let's get back to fundamentals. Namely, sex."

"All right. You paint a rather alluring picture of the feminine ideal. In its place I offer you the Flapper — thin, flat-chested, neurotically shrill and neurotically slangy, gin-drinking, affected—"

"Okay, I get the message," Don cut in. "But as long as we're playing the game, why do we have to

limit ourselves to my today and your yesterday? If both the past and the present are so intolerable, why can't we hop into your merry not-so-Oldsmobile and take a joyride into the future?"

"I did," Claymore said.

"What?"

"I said I did." He drained his glass. "This is my second stop, you might say. My first was to a time approximately thirty-five years from now."

"Why didn't you stay there? Don't tell me things were just as bad?"

"Judge for yourself. No Communist scare any more."

"Perfect!"

"It's the Conservatives they're afraid of. Consies, they call them. Advocates of go-slowism in government and business and international relations. Things need to be done. They *must* be done. Result — suppression of free speech, general censorship, spy hunts. Then there's the plutonium scandal to consider, and the sub-teen delinquency problem, and the druglegging. I don't think I'll mention *their* popular songs, or what has happened to entertainment media. Dimensional TV can be pretty overwhelming, and of course advertising has kept pace. As for comfort — you'd never imagine the rigors and distress of a rocket flight to the Moon."

"And the women?" asked Don hopefully.

CLAYMORE made an ellipse with his hands. "Lovely. Average weight, two hundred pounds. They're known as Queen-sized dolls. Quite aggressive, of course, as is only natural under a matriarchy. As you can perhaps detect even from the trends of today, they control virtually all of the corporations and business enterprises, together with entertainment media and government."

"Then what's the answer?" Don protested. "You mean you can't beat the game? You can't get away from it, wherever you go?"

"You can't get away from yourself," Claymore declared. "That's the only answer I've learned. How you live, in any age, is up to you. The adjustments you make with your own environment."

"But that's corny," said Don.

"You mean horse feathers?" Claymore retorted.

Don nodded. "I suppose you intend to go back to 1925 and take up just where you left off?"

"Why not? I've learned what I wanted to learn. And if you have problems, I advise you to do the same. Accept reality."

"That's a lot of—" Don hesitated. Suddenly he banged on the table. "No, it isn't! You're right, by God! Accept reality, that's the answer. Now, look. You claim you actually came here in a time machine. Do you understand what this means? Why, it's a multi-million-dollar

proposition from word one!"

He hunched forward. "Look, let's you and I get together, equal partnership. I'll handle the whole deal, do all the spadework. In two weeks we'll blast everything else off the map. I can get you the biggest publicity campaign you ever heard of — spreads in every newspaper and magazine in the country, your choice of network time. The advertising tieup is so sweet, I don't even have to talk about it. Man from the past here today — in person! You'll hit all the big shows! Lawrence Welk, Steve Allen, Person to Person. What an endorsement job you can do on products! Shove you out next to a 1925 icebox and let you compare it with a new freezer, let you stand up there and break a few lousy Caruso records after you listen to the latest Fats Domino album. Get the pitch? And we'll ghost a daily column for you, the homespun philosophy bit. You're going to be big, bigger than Godfrey ever was at his peak, bigger than—"

"Sorry." Claymore stood up. "I meant what I said. I'm going back where I belong."

"Now wait a minute! This kind of opportunity only comes once in a lifetime. And there's no time like the present—"

"For you, perhaps. For me, there's no time like the past."

"But you said yourself it stinks."

"I can adjust. And that's what I'm telling you now—adjust to your

own time, your own circumstances."

Don shook his head, gazing into his empty glass. When he looked up again, Claymore was gone.

If he'd ever been there.

Hell, maybe it was just the drinkie.

SURE, it was the drinkie. Time travel was wacky. And so was the cornball philosophy. *Make the best of things as they are.* In other words, his subconscious was telling him to forget Rosalie, forget the rat race, go home to the little woman and the kids. A real lousy script ending. Well, he wouldn't buy it.

He didn't have to buy it. *He could sell it.*

Sure. *That* was the answer. Little old subconscious working away all the time, still alive and breathing through a snorkel-tube under the ten Martinis. It had just given him a great plot. Make a fine show.

There's this old pappy-guy from the past, see? He invents this time machine gizmo and comes to the present day. At first he likes it and becomes a big celebrity, but after a while he gets so he can't stand all the phony routines. Finally they're going to put him on television, to make a big speech to the nation — sort of a Will Rogers bit — and a bunch of politicians have him in a bind to endorse their lousy candidate. Only he gets up and double-crosses them by denouncing the whole act. Tells the people to re-

turn to the old rugged individualism, the homely virtues, all that jazz.

Why, it was a natural, that's what it was! A natural!

Don fumbled around in his pocket for his notebook. Better get this down quick before he forgot. Tomorrow he could give it to a couple of the staff boys. All they'd have to do would be to run it through the typewriter — maybe he'd give them a third of the deal, but he'd keep the writing credit.

No Time Like The Present. A

great title. A great idea. And a great little thought, too.

A man has to make the best of what he's got.

Don started to scribble. He knew where he was and what he was doing, and right now he wouldn't trade places with anyone in the world. Anywhere, any time.

(Excerpt from Yardley University Daily Bulletin, April 5, 1925) Professor Herbert Claymore, head of the Physics Department, resumed his duties today after a brief sabbatical.

— BY ROBERT BLOCH

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BLACKSWORD

DICTATOR desires employment, preferably permanent, in similar capacity. Will accept opportunity to establish own circumstances. Seven years experience. Last position terminated at request of populace. Box 702, GBS Network.

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*Being a live-wire political scientist, he
needed just a single good connection . . . to
get high-voltage power out of a hot lead!*

BY A. J. OFFUTT

Illustrated by WOOD

STEP ONE

THE hotel clerk shook his head obstinately. "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Blacksword is an honored guest, a friend of the management. In view of the circumstances surrounding—" he hesitated — "the termination of his recent position, and the enmity toward him from several sources, I am afraid we must refuse—"

The little man scrawled on a sheet of hotel stationery. "Would you please have this sent up to Mr. Blacksword? He'll understand, I think."

The clerk regarded the paper

dubiously. "Just 'Box 91'?"

The little man nodded.

The clerk's eyes went over the little man's shoulder and he turned. Two men stood a couple of feet behind him. They were big fellows, both wearing guns. Union bodyguards, then.

One took the piece of stationery. "I'll take this up to Mr. Blacksword myself. You will please remain here."

The little man bowed and the fellow strode to the elevator. His companion stood very still, his eyes on the little man.

"You needn't stare," the little man said. "I won't run away. I also haven't any bombs, guns, poisons, or whatever. I assume you have a permit for *your* gun? May I see it?"

The fellow reached inside his jacket and handed the little man a leather case.

"Ummm . . . Protectors Union, Local 110. Assigned to Mr. G. P. Blackword. Thank you." The little man handed back the credentials and turned away, ignoring the bodyguard.

The light on the house phone winked and the clerk flipped it on.

"Blackword talking. Frisk him and send him up."

"All right, Mr. Blackword," said the clerk.

The little man smiled angelically and raised his arms to shoulder level. The protector patted him thoroughly.

"Clean," he said, and the little man took the elevator up.

The bodyguard went with him. They met the second protector in the corridor and they flanked him as he approached the door to Blackword's room. They were duly scanned by winking lights and the door opened.

G. Paul Blackword sat in a chair smoking a cigar. "Come in," he said around it, and the little man went in.

Blackword touched the stud on the arm of the chair and the door

closed. The little man turned and saw that the protectors had not come in.

"Alone?" he asked.

"I'm not a psycho," Blackword told him. "Just cautious." He grinned around the cigar. "You know who I am," he pointed out, "so I'm one play behind."

"Keplar. A. J. Keplar."

Blackword inclined his head without rising. "Representing?"

"Troy."

Blackword raised his brows. "Troy!" He turned his head to one side with a twist of his mouth. "Well! Please sit down, Mr. Keplar. You'll pardon me for not rising . . . I'm sure you're aware I have a bad leg."

STEP TWO

THE man generally referred to as the Black Sword blew white clouds of cigar smoke at the ceiling. "How is it that Troy finds herself so suddenly in need of a dictator, Mr. Keplar?"

"Mr. Blackword—"

"People don't call me mister," Blackword interrupted. "Just Blackword. Some commentator had a brainstorm once and my name became two words. It has a lovely romantic ring which the news services like. Pardon me for interrupting, but as long as I've done so, will you join me in a drink?"

"I think not, Mr. — pardon me — Blacksword. But please feel free to have one yourself."

Blacksword grinned. His finger had already dialed a scotch-on-the-rocks. The servo began making noises and the glass popped out on the tray. Blacksword picked it up negligently.

"Troy has been a dictatorship for thirty-one years, Blacksword," said Keplar. "For the last seventeen years, it was under Colonel Hines, who seized power in the conventional manner, a military coup. As you may be aware from the newscasts, he died very suddenly two weeks ago. The council finds that no man on Troy is capable of taking his place. So we placed our ad."

"Died very suddenly, hm? How was that?"

Keplar shrugged. "Rather an unromantic end for a man of Hines' stature, I'm afraid. He suffered a heart attack."

"I see. Proceed."

"That about sums it up, sir. After casting about for two weeks, we of the council found no acceptable successor. It goes without saying that there were numerous candidates. One, Major General Farris, attempted to seize power. He was forestalled by the council and subsequently murdered by his own men."

"The council stopped him, you say?"

The little man nodded. "According to TAI law, a dictatorship having a secondary control council, when without a dictator, is in the hands of the council until a replacement is found for the dictator."

Blacksword nodded and sipped noisily at his scotch.

"We decided to advertise," Keplar went on. "When your ad coincidentally appeared at the same time, we were curious and wrote. When we received your rather — uh — laconic reply, we decided to take the chance of contacting you. We had requested references, of course, but naturally we are familiar with your background."

"Thank you," said Blacksword. "Recognition is very flattering, especially when one finds oneself out of a job."

BBLACKSWORD sipped scotch, puffed cloudily on the cigar, and regarded Keplar. "But you're a damned liar, Keplar. I happen to know the full story. Item: Troy is on the brink of war. Item: The council felt that this Major General Farris would make a better commander in wartime than Hines. So you murdered Hines. Or had him murdered. When Major General Farris tried to take command, he was killed by the army, which remained loyal to Hines. Item: You want me very badly and placed your ad immediately *after* you learned of mine.

"Naturally, the true circumstances are not widely known," Blacksword went on. "The people of Troy, for instance, aren't aware of the illegal intervention of the Trojan Council. For your information, you were rather sloppy, and I'm sure TAI shares my knowledge. But they are inclined not to take action, provided the situation is cleared up satisfactorily. They wouldn't accomplish anything by arresting the council en masse. I'm not sure of this, of course. I have little dealings with Terra Alta Imperata. I'm merely assuming their agents are nearly as competent as mine." He smiled lazily. "Although not as well paid.

"Come, Keplar," Blacksword concluded. "You didn't think I'd swallow your tale, did you? Hell's bells, I have spies and sources that make your council and its machinations look like a Boy Scout troop."

Blessword stuck the cigar back in his mouth, raised one eyebrow in the characteristic mannerism witnessed by trillions on the video. He glared amusedly at the little man from Troy.

Keplar sighed and spread his hands. "A test, of course. We deliberately concocted the story I told you. If you were the man we wanted, we were sure you would know it to be a fabrication."

"You're *still* lying!" said Blacksword. "Smoothly, though, and my

compliments for that. I admire a man who thinks on his feet — a prime requisite for salesmen, dictators and diplomats."

Blessword regarded the ceiling reminiscently. "As you no doubt know, I was a salesman when I first went to Alsace. A twenty-thousand-a-year salesman. I was good at thinking on my feet. Reading and studying were my hobby — I can quote you chapter and verse of Napoleon and Caesar and Lee and Arthenburg. By being a good salesman and thinking on my feet *and* with the aid of my hobby, I took over Alsace when they decided to try a dictatorship. I ruled as absolute dictator for seven years. Then the Alsacians decided on a democracy — the idiots! — and, according to TAI law, I resigned. I left the planet. Unfortunately some fool fanatic took a shot at me. So at present I'm not only out of a job, I'm out one good leg."

Blessword looked back at Keplar, puffed and grinned. "My apologies. I hadn't intended to give a personal history. It's natural enough, I suppose. A man can't be a dictator — or even a good salesman — without being something of an egotist." He looked squarely into Keplar's eyes. "Just as he can't be a diplomat without being an expert liar. I think you'll admit the truth of both statements, Keplar. Your story was no test. You underestimated me. You thought I might

not want to talk about Troy if I knew what *really* happened to your last ruler. And naturally you don't want the story to get out. If someone — *someone*, Keplar — mentioned publicly that Hines was assassinated by agents of the Trojan Council, TAI would have to make use of its knowledge and prosecute."

The ex-dictator of the planet Alsace leaned forward and pointed with his cigar. "I think we fully understand each other now. Shall we discuss terms?"

Keplar sighed. "Let's," he said.

STEP THREE

THE major picked up the report. It was stamped "Terra Alta Imperata: TOP SECRET," and sealed. He poked the packet into an unsealer, waited for the fool-proof seal to open, and took out the report marked "TROY: BLACKSWORD."

Page one summed up the recent death of Troy's dictator, the unsuccessful attempt by Farris to gain control, and Farris' murder by the army. There was a brief summary of what TAI knew to be the actual circumstances in the situation.

The major turned to page two, read a moment, then flicked the button on his intercom. "Come in here a few minutes, Jack."

The young lieutenant entered and shut the door. He saw the TOP

SECRET seal and locked the door.

"Sit down. I want you to hear this. Light up if you want."

This reading of reports aloud to his adjutant was a habit of the major's. He felt both of them gained a more thorough understanding than by scanning and digesting the reports individually.

"First a quick refresher on the general situation," the major said. "Here's one that's been boiled down to the bone. It's been abridged and digested — umm — seven times."

The lieutenant grinned and turned his face quickly away.

"'A brief summary of the Troy — Macedon situation,'" the major read. "There are five planets in the Hellenic system. They are called Troy, Macedon, Monos, Deutoros and Tritos. Troy and Macedon, the innermost two, are fully inhabited. Monos, Deutoros and Tritos have never been colonized, although Monos is able to support human life.

"Tensions exist between Troy and Macedon for the following basic reasons:

"(1) They use different governmental systems, Troy being a dictatorship while Macedon is a parliamentary monarchy.

"(2) They have never been able to reach a mutually acceptable mutual trade agreement.

"(3) They have been unable to reach a mutually acceptable agreement for exploiting the remaining

three worlds of their system.

"They have consistently declined TAI offers of aid and/or mediation.

"TAI is thus forced to maintain a strict non-intervention policy with regard to the Hellenic system."

The major discarded the sheet. "Now to current events," he said. He read through the first page of the report and looked up. "We know that on March 13 Troy advertised for a dictator, identifying themselves only by a GBS box number. At the same time Blacksword advertised for employment. A seeming coincidence — but we also know that Troy placed their ad *after* they saw Blacksword's."

"In other words, they wanted him," the lieutenant said.

WITH a nod, the major returned to the report. "On March 22 A. J. Keplar, Vice-President of the Trojan Secondary Control Council, arrived on Luna. He proceeded at once to the Hotel Starlight and was subsequently admitted to the room occupied by G. P. Blacksword, recently resigned dictator of the planet Alsace, now a democracy.

"Blacksword and Keplar remained in conference for two hours and thirty-seven minutes. At the end of that time, Blacksword checked out, and he and Keplar, accompanied by two armed guards

from the Protectors Union, took a taxi to the port. All four boarded the Trojan ship *Ilium*, but after a few minutes the protectors came out again and left, carrying their gunbelts. Obviously they had been discharged." The major looked up with a wry face. "Obviously," he said drily. "This agent loves detail. Clock-and-dagger stuff goes to your head sometimes. Ummm . . . 'The *Ilium* was immediately cleared and blasted away for Troy. Report ends.'"

He picked up another.

"The *Ilium* landed on Troy on March 24. A. J. Keplar, Vice-President —' etc., etc., etc. Here: 'On March 26 G. Paul Blacksword assumed office as dictator of Troy. His first act was to accuse Council Presidor Wood of high treason. Wood and a hired assassin were turned over to TAI as the murderers of the ex-dictator of Troy. In his formal charge Blacksword stated that no one else on the planet was implicated in Hines' murder. Wood and the assassin were returned to Earth under guard.'"

The major looked up. "Now we happen to know, Jack, that the decision to murder Hines was voted upon by the entire council and carried unanimously. The arrest of Wood and the assassin was Blacksword's way of gaining the favor of the people of Troy. On the other hand, he had no wish to replace the entire council."

"Clever fellow," the lieutenant drawled.

The major smiled. "That's the very mildest way of putting it, Jack. TAI has decided to accept Wood and let the matter drop. We haven't any particular desire to arrest the entire council, either. Besides, if we did that now, we'd have to take Blacksword as well."

"But we have something on him," the lieutenant said, "for future reference."

The major nodded and resumed reading. "'At the same time, Blacksword advised the council of his personal preference for Keplar as Presidor. The council accordingly voted Keplar into office.'"

"Sounds like a deal," said the lieutenant.

"Of course. A private deal between Blacksword and Keplar, aside from the council's contract with Blacksword," the major said. "Blacksword immediately closeted himself in an all-night session with Troy's general staff. On March 28 Blacksword, Keplar, and Foreign Minister Cole spaced to the planet Macedon aboard the *Ilium*. Reports ends.'"

THE major began a new page. "'On Macedon, Blacksword, Keplar, and Cole met with Macedon's King Robert and his diplomatic staff. The meetings lasted three days. At the end of this time, the Trojan delegation returned to

Troy. Immediately after their departure, King Robert called for a meeting of the Macedonian general staff. Opinion: War between Macedon and Troy immediately imminent. Report ends.'"

The major flipped to a new page. "'In a world-televised speech on April 6, Dictator Blacksword informed Troy that Macedon remained "insolently adamant" in its demands, and that he might be "forced to call on you, the people of Troy, to lend us your loyal sons to protect our planet against the Macedonian aggressors." The speech was followed by hotly anti-Macedon demonstrations all over Troy. Opinion: Immediate war between Troy and Macedon.'"

"So it's war," the lieutenant commented.

"Hell, we've known that for eight years. But Blacksword's presence changes things. The probability factor of Macedon's emerging victorious was 83 on 20 March. On 8 April, it had dropped to 60. As of today, it's minus 10 — 60-40 in favor of Blacksword's winning. Of course that's our computer. Macedon still ranks higher on the news services — but they don't have the information we do."

The lieutenant whistled. "One man."

"One man. He's that good. He gets things done, even though his methods may not be the most humane or popular. Witness Alsace.

He whipped them into a power, but they were so shocked by his methods that they voted themselves a democracy."

The lieutenant nodded. "What do we do?"

"We — I'll reserve my answer for a moment, Jack, until I hear your opinion. What would you say?"

The lieutenant considered the problem, weighing the factors carefully in his mind. "The differences are strictly between Troy and Macedon . . . no other worlds are involved . . . no conceivable immediate danger to TAI . . . both are grade-C planets . . . I'd say we do nothing. TAI has no grounds for intervention unless Blacksword — no, he's too smart. We do nothing." He looked questioningly at his superior, read the verification of his decision in the major's eyes.

"Correct. This is none of our business. We let them have their war. But we do a little more than nothing. We watch. As always, TAI sits back and watches." The major initialed the report. "Seal this and forward it to headquarters, Jack. By the way, are you and Alice doing anything Friday night? How about some bridge over at our place?"

STEP FOUR

At least ten feet long and five feet wide, the desk was empty of paper or books or letter opener.

There was a calendar on it and a cigar box and two ashtrays and a visual communicator. In one corner was a panel of buttons. The desk and the big swivel chair behind it gave the impression of bigness — bigness and power.

The man behind the desk was big, too, and it was obvious he wielded vast power, just as it was obvious he was accustomed to power and knew how to wield it.

Judging from what showed above the top of the desk, he had to be at least six feet two. There was a swelling expanse of at least two feet between his shoulders. His neck was thick and the head above it massive and jowly. The face was slightly red, the hair gray-shot brown and cut crisply short. The nose was too large even for the man who wore it. His brows were bushy and dark, without the streaks of gray in his hair. Beneath them, very round, very dark brown eyes glistened and pierced like diamond drills.

His hands were the biggest Gorham had ever seen, and the hairiest. The cigar smelled, like all cigars to Gorham, bad. The bearman (man-bear?) behind the desk seldom took it out of his mouth, but when he did, with two hairy fingers, its ends was a wet, thoroughly shredded pulp.

As Gorham entered, the cigar jutted out of the face like a second nose.

"Captain Gorham, I believe," said the big man, the cigar bobbing up and down. "Come on in and sit down, Captain. I haven't bitten anyone in years."

Captain Gorham walked to the desk, hesitated, and sat. The chair on his side of the desk was a great deal smaller, its front legs shorter than the rear ones.

"You'll pardon me for not rising, Captain, but as you no doubt know, I'm crippled. And if you're anything like me, you wouldn't deign to shake hands with a seated man."

"Quite so," Gorham said. He crossed his legs.

"That isn't true, really," the big man went on. "My leg is quite all right. I don't rise because it gives me an advantage—makes the other fellow feel uncomfortable. Uncomfortable chair, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"Of course it is. Purposely uncomfortable, and for the same reason. I'd offer you a cigar, Captain Gorham, but this one is so visibly distasteful to you I won't waste the effort."

"I never—"

"What can I do for you, Captain Gorham?"

Gorham mustered himself. "Mr. Blacksword—"

"Someone should've briefed you, Captain Gorham. I'm not called mister. Blacksword suffices. My father gave it to me in one piece, but a GBS newscaster took the lib-

erty of changing it to two words. Sorry to interrupt. Please go on."

The brown eyes drilled into Gorham and he cleared his throat. Then he caught the twinkle in the eyes and took another ten seconds.

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere."

Blacksword stared. Then he snatched the cigar out of his mouth and fell back in the swivel chair, laughing. Following the example set by centuries of swivel chairs, it creaked.

"Well, I'll just be happy damned! My very sincere apologies, Captain—" he broke off into laughter. "My very sincere apologies! Just a moment, will you?"

He bent forward across the immense desk and activated the communicator. "Bring a comfortable chair in here, please. And—" he looked up, one eyebrow raised—"Captain, I realize you're on duty, but you won't force a man to drink alone, will you?"

"Never. Severe breach of etiquette."

"Two scotches on the rocks," Blacksword continued into the box, beaming at Gorham. "Fast."

HE clicked off and leaned back with the cigar in his mouth again. "May as well discuss the

weather, Captain. The s. o. b. would probably interrupt us right in the middle of a vital sentence, anyhow."

"Nice weather you're having here," Gorham remarked.

"Very. Sorry I had to cut your man out of it the other day. But let's face it, Captain, he's a disgrace to TAI." Blacksword shook his head. "Louisiest spy I ever saw."

"I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about," Gorham smiled.

"Of course you haven't. Oh, I don't mind — that's why I fired him from my staff ostensibly for seducing one of the girls in the kitchen. But we all understand each other; she was paid to seduce him."

Captain Gorham shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"My prime aim in life. That's why I'm keeping my pilot. He's such a damn fine pilot, I intend to let him continue reporting to his superior in TAI. He'll be surprised when he sees the new uniform I've designed for him, however. Green and blue!"

Gorham glanced down at his green and blue TAI uniform with a rather sickly grin.

"Ah! I think you'll find that chair a little better, Captain Gorham. Thanks, Swahili." Blacksword took the drinks and handed one to Gorham after the captain had settled himself into the new chair.

"One of my personal idiosyn-

crasies," Blacksword said, smacking his lips. "Always call my servants Swahili." He leaned back and rattled the ice in his glass. "I requested a representative of TAI, Captain Gorham, because I thought I'd better find out your views concerning the Troy-Macedon situation."

Captain Gorham appeared to swallow with the wrong tract. "Sir?"

"As far as I'm able to see, there's no reason here for TAI to interfere," Blacksword explained.

"As far as I can see, Blacksword, you're correct," Gorham said. "You're aware of our policy."

"Big brother. Shoulder to cry on. Helping hand if needed. No intervention unless someone threatens galactic security. The usual benevolent TAI policy. My spies had so informed me, but I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth."

Gorham made a mental note to demand a thorough security check of his staff.

"I also wanted to assure you I have absolutely no intentions of threatening anyone but the Macedonians. As a matter of fact, I'm not threatening them. They're the troublemakers here."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Gorham said. "In that case, we shall go on keeping an eye on you, but remain outside the dispute. By the same token, we can't be expected to lend assistance to the defeated planet."

"Oh, certainly not. But naturally Earth will. She always comes through in a pinch. It's almost worthwhile being defeated, just to let good old Earth come in and rehabilitate."

Gorham smiled drily. "Surely you don't intend being defeated?"

Blackword snorted. "Captain, perhaps there's one thing more we should get straight between us. TAI will be very happy to know this. It's something your spies don't — and won't — know. I have absolutely no intention of being defeated, because I have absolutely no intention of fighting."

STEP FIVE

THE big man with the smelly cigar was ushered into the office of Vassily Kearney, President of United Earth. Noting the cigar, President Kearney delightedly lit one of his own.

"Have to be very careful with these," he explained. "Diplomacy, y'know. Some people don't like cigar smoke."

"That's why I haven't a reputation for diplomacy," Blackword informed him. "That a genuine Havana?"

Kearney nodded, turning the cigar lovingly between his fingers. "One of our chief exports."

"How well I know," Blackword snorted. "Cost forty dollars each on Troy."

Kearney extended a humidor. "In the White House, they're free to guests," he beamed.

Blackword helped himself to a handful and stuffed them in his pockets. He carefully stubbed his own out in the guest ashtray, lit the Havana, and sent up a cloud to arouse the envy of any ancient rocket ship. Kearney stared at the mangled butt.

"I'm well aware of the value of your time, President Kearney," Blackword puffed, "and I'll try to take up very little of it. As you've probably heard, I'm now affiliated with Troy."

"Oh, yes. As dictator."

Blackword looked introspective. "I just had a thought. I'm not going to fire my laundry maid. The one with the Earth accent and the pocket transmitter. She doesn't find out much and she's very nice to look at."

Kearney coughed. "I — ah — understand Troy and Macedon are about to go to war." He sounded very unhappy.

Blackword nodded and leaned back. "Looks that way," he said. "I'm glad you brought it up. That's mainly what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Yes. I suppose it's about the rehab—"

"In a way. How'd this rehabilitation business get started, anyhow?"

"It's one of our oldest — ah — tra-

ditions," Kearney said, shaking his head regretfully. "We're the Mother Planet, you know, and somehow we've always continued the — ah — tradition of aiding conquered peoples get back on their feet."

"I see," Blacksword sympathized. "That must cost Earth a pretty penny."

"My dear fellow!" Kearney cried. "You have no idea! You should see the World Debt!"

"Then you'd be most happy to avoid such expenditures whenever possible. Which explains your spies being on every inhabited planet in the Galaxy, I suppose."

The President looked embarrassed. "Ah — Mr. Blacksword — about your — ah — laundry maid. We shall—"

"My apologies for bringing in my household affairs," Blacksword interrupted. "What would you estimate the cost of rehabilitating, say, Troy or Macedon?"

Kearney threw up his hands. "Any amount! Depending, of course, on the amount of destruction."

"A real holocaust," Blacksword said with a careless wave of his hand. "Say, forty per cent destruction."

Kearney groaned.

"That can be avoided, Mr. President," Blacksword said.

Kearney stared at him questioningly. And hopefully.

"I can stave off a war. Person-

ally. Alone. I hate to sound pompous, but I doubt seriously if anyone else could."

Kearney began thanking him on behalf of all Earth.

BLACKSWORD raised a hand. "This is rather embarrassing," he said, wearing his best embarrassed look, "but we'll need a small sum to carry it off. Without a shot being fired," he went on smoothly, as Kearney opened his mouth. "A very small sum, compared to the cost of rehabilitation. We figure half a million."

"Good heavens! My dear fellow—"

"You must remember," Blacksword pressed, "that Troy is a very poor planet, but that it will be a very big war."

"— is that all it would cost?" Kearney finished.

"— and —" Blacksword clamped his lips together and nodded solemnly. The sales job was over. "Guaranteed: no war!"

Kearney was obviously elated. But he remembered to be politic. "We'd need assurance—"

"The Secondary Control Council of Troy has authorized me to write out an agreement to the effect that, in the event of war, there'd be no rehabilitation appeal to Earth. Signed by me, as Dictator of Troy." His hand came out of his pocket with a pen and a cigar. He replaced the Havana lovingly.



Overjoyed, Kearney pulled letterheads from a desk drawer.

"Oh, I already have the agreement. Had to clear it with the Council before I left, of course," Blacksword explained with a winning smile. "It lacks only our signatures."

"Of course," the President said. Then, "Of course!"

They signed.

"Now there's the matter of efficiency," Blacksword said. "I believe that in a democracy the people must be consulted on expenses—"

"Not at all, not at all! Comes out of petty cash. Goes on the budget under 'defense' or 'foreign affairs' or something." He pressed a button on his desk.

Ten minutes later the draft — made out to Blacksword personally — was in his hands and Kearney was saying, "It has been a pleasure, sir. Delighted."

"Always glad to do business with a democracy," Blacksword said, and he left.

He put a coin in the Newsbuoy on the corner and requested the current handicap on the expected war between Macedon and Troy.

"According to GBS computer, probability factor of Macedon emerging victorious is 72.9, Troy's 27.1."

"Suggest you check with Earth High Command," Blacksword said, and walked on. "Ah, that Kearney drives a shrewd bargain!"

At a bank six blocks away, he opened an account. The size of his initial deposit carried him into the office of the president, who called the White House for verification of the half-million-dollar check. The White House was delighted that Blacksword was opening an account on Earth. So was the president of the Home Planet Bank and Trust Co. of Earth.

"A very wise move," he was saying as Blacksword left with a checkbook. "We have been in business for one hundred and seventy-six years, and in all that time we have never—"

Blessword neither heard nor cared what the bank had not done in one hundred and seventy-six years. He limped out hurriedly.

At the post office on the corner, he filled out a \$500,000 check from his new book, marked it for deposit only, and mailed it to the First Planetary Bank of Luna, to the personal account of G. Paul Blacksword.

The owner of the First Planetary Bank of Luna, G. Paul Blacksword, then departed for Troy.

STEP SIX

THE lieutenant took Blacksword in to the captain, who took him in to the major, who escorted him upstairs to the Sector Colonel.

"The Black Sword!" Colonel McClintock exclaimed. "Come in!

Sit down! What may I do for you?"

Blacksword sat down quickly and rubbed his leg. "Business call, Colonel," he growled. He took the last gratis Havana from his lips and pointed it at the colonel. "I've got a complaint to make."

Colonel McClintock nodded and fitted his hands together. "I see. I've heard, of course, about Troy's disagreement with Macedon—"

"No doubt. This complaint isn't against Macedon, Colonel. It's against TAI, in the person of Captain T. L. Gorham, and it will mean your eagles, your career, and your pension."

Colonel McClintock raised the CO₂ content of the room with a whoosh. "Sir?"

Blacksword leaned forward and drummed stubby fingers on McClintock's desk. "Am I correct in assuming that the — as you put it — disagreement between my planet and Macedon is our own business and not subject to TAI intervention?"

"Well, I — Blacksword, I — yes. And we have kept our hands off."

"Perhaps so. But Captain Gorham has not. I told Captain Gorham, in my office, in strictest confidence, that I had absolutely no intention of fighting Macedon."

Colonel McClintock nodded. "Captain Gorham reported that fact directly to me and I assure you, sir, the information has not left this office!"

"The information *has* left this office, Colonel. In Gorham's fat mouth. And it did not stay there! Hold on, I'm far from through. Gorham went straight to King Robert of Macedon and dropped a hint that I was not planning to fight. I suppose he hoped Macedon would be overjoyed — they didn't really want to fight either — there'd be no war, and he'd get the credit. I'd judge he's bucking for your job, on the sly."

"The scoundrell!"

"Well," Blacksword went on, "Macedon was overjoyed, all right. So overjoyed, they immediately redoubled their offensive preparations, and completely shelved defensive plans."

The colonel opened his mouth.

"Dammit, I'm not through yet!"

Blacksword rapped out. "This constitutes illegal TAI intervention. Whether Gorham was authorized or not, he represents TAI and he spilled the beans. And he's your man. Ten words to your superior, Colonel, and that chicken farm you've been planning for your old age will end right there — in the planning stage. Along with your career."

COLONEL McClintock stared. He sagged slowly back in his chair. It objected squeakily. When he finally found his voice, it was scarcely less squeaky than the chair. "And — and — ?"

Blackword leaned back complacently. "And why have I come to you, rather than your superior? Because you and I have had no trouble to date. You can handle this easily. First, you drum Gorham out of TAI."

The colonel waited a long moment, then prompted Blackword hopefully. "Second?"

"Second," came Blackword's voice from a billowing cloud of smoke, "since my feelings are hurt and my plan endangered, and since my feelings and my plans come high, you can assuage my deep injury by about half a million dollars."

Colonel McClintock bounced up in his chair and clamped his hands on the edge of his desk. "Why, that's nothing but black—"

"—sword," Blackword cut in. "Careful with your language, Colonel. My feelings might get even more hurt. What's the name of your superior, by the way?"

McClintock fell back in the chair. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"You'll be worse than that if you don't dig out a checkbook!" Blackword snapped. "And sign this agreement that the check is bona fide and you won't try any nonsense such as stopping payment." He flipped the paper across the desk. "And let's have no nonsense about the money. I can name you any one of six TAI accounts for six different exigencies, any one of

which will never feel a mere half million. Do you need a pen?"

There were a few words bandied as to where the co-signed agreement should be kept. Blackword, of course, limped from Colonel McClintock's office with both check and agreement. Colonel McClintock left his office shortly after with a sick headache.

Blackword sent the check, marked deposit only, to the Home World Bank and Trust Co. of Earth, special delivery. He then wrote himself a check to the amount of \$500,000 on that bank. This he marked for deposit only and dispatched, regular mail, to the First Planetary Bank of Luna.

He then departed for Troy.

STEP SEVEN

CAPTAIN Gorham bounced to his feet. "You *what*?"

"You heard me," Blackword told him. "I told Colonel McClintock you dropped a hint to Mace-don that I'm not planning to fight them. To save his own skin, he wrote me a rather large check — never mind on what TAI emergency account — and immediately set into motion proceedings for having you court-martialed. You've had it with Terra Alta Imperata, Captain Gorham."

"You filthy — I didn't — you told him a deliberate lie, Blackword! Why? What in the devil have I—"

"Easy on that adrenalin, Captain Gorham. Sit down. There, that's much better. I want you to hear something. It's a recording of our conversation here a couple of weeks ago." Blacksword touched a switch.

"—to interrupt. Please go on," came Blacksword's recorded voice.

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere." That was Gorham's caustic voice.

Blawsword switched off the machine and regarded Gorham over his cigar.

"Surely you don't mean that merely because of that remark, you've done all this to me?" Gorham asked incredulously.

"I do. Because of that remark, plus the results of a very extensive investigation, I find I like you very much, Gorham. So I set about working out a plan to have you with me, rather than wasting your nerve and talent with TAI. And, incidentally, I managed to pick up a piece of change from TAI, as well as placing Colonel McClintock in my 'bought man' ledger."

Gorham leaned forward across Blacksword's massive desk. "And what's to prevent my taking this whole story to Earth High Command headquarters?"

"Nothing — except a little adult

thinking on your part. You're not TAI material, Gorham. You know it and I know it. You're damned fine Blacksword material. Please allow me to point out that Blacksword men receive ample opportunity for travel and excitement, frequent raises and bonuses, and the very best of salary. As a matter of fact, the starting figure I have in mind for you is considerably above a TAI captain's pay. Or a TAI colonel's pay, for that matter.

"And there's another inducement. My men and I accept bribes as a matter of course, and energetically solicit such additional emolument. All I require in return is loyalty and a closed mouth."

Blawsword sat back and relit the cold cigar. He regarded Captain Gorham with a very slight smile.

Gorham smiled back. "Quite a sales pitch. Only it wasn't necessary. But you knew that before you began, didn't you? I assume the plan is for me to resign from TAI at once?"

Blawsword nodded. He opened a drawer in his desk and passed a deposit voucher across the desk. It showed that the sum of \$25,000 had been deposited to the account of Captain T. L. Gorham.

"First six months in advance," Blacksword said.

Gorham examined the slip of paper with a raised eyebrow, noted it was dated two weeks earlier, and



grinned. He buttoned it into his tunic. He stood.

"Gorham reporting for duty assignment, sir."

BLACKSWORD laughed aloud. "None of that. My name is Blacksword. And we don't report that way. I have little use for the military way of doing things. Keep it sloppy."

Gorham stuck his hands in his pockets. "Admitting the fact that you were absolutely sure of yourself — and me — what if I had refused?"

"Oh, that's something I forgot to mention, Tom. You'll be watched.

And the man who watches you will be watched. And — well, I hope you won't mind, but there's the matter of the recording. This is a composite of all you said when you were here before." He flipped the switch again, and again they listened to Gorham's voice. "This will give you an idea of how we do things."

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere. Never. Severe breach of etiquette. Nice weather you're having here. I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking



about. Suit yourself. Sir? As far as I can see, Blackword, you're correct. You're aware of our policy. That's very thoughtful of you. In that case, we shall go on keeping an eye on you, but remain outside the dispute. By the same token, we can't be expected to lend assistance to the defeated planet. Surely you don't intend being defeated?"

Gorham looked questioningly at his new employer and shrugged.

Blackword grinned. "Here's what my experts have done with it." He waved at the still-playing machine.

Gorham: Surely you don't intend being defeated?

Blackword: Of course not. But I want my methods kept under glass. This is a check, Captain Gorham. It's drawn to the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars. Would you consider . . .

Gorham: Never. Severe breach of etiquette. You're aware of our policy.

Blackword: Oh, naturally. But if I were to mail this check to your bank . . .

Gorham: Suit yourself. That's very thoughtful of you. Of course we can't be expected to go on keeping an eye on you.

Blackword: Fine. It's been a pleasure, Captain Gorham. Of

course this little matter will remain strictly between the two of us.

Gorham: Of course. In that case, I have pressing duties elsewhere. Nice weather you're having here.

Blackword: Ah! Good!

Gorham: I'd like to be on my way.

Blackword: All right. Thank you very much, Captain Gorham.

Gorham stared at him. Then he burst out laughing. "At least in this work I'll never have to worry about the wisdom of my orders or my superior's competence!"

STEP EIGHT

MACEDONIAN scouts kept Troy under constant surveillance for signs of departing warcraft. Trojan scouts kept Macedon under constant surveillance for signs of departing warcraft. Scouts from neither planet saw any evidence of action. Scouts from both planets were greatly surprised, therefore, when they were angrily called home.

The Trojans disembarked to find themselves under arrest. Their protests were answered with a very curt gesture. Their eyes followed the pointing finger.

There was a satellite in the sky.

No, not a satellite — it was stationary. A large round steel thing, perched on nothing, far (a hundred miles? fifty? how big was the thing?) above their capital.

They were all subsequently court-martialed for gross neglect in the line of duty. They never understood how the thing had got there. But it was Macedonian, and it ended the war before it began.

The assembled members of the Secondary Control Council of Troy looked up as Dictator G. Paul Blackword limped briskly in.

"Good day, gentlemen. It would appear negotiations are the order of the day."

A councilor — Frey — stood and leveled a finger at him.

"Blackword, we hired you as dictator for one reason — to win the war against Macedon!" he shouted. There was loud assent.

Blackword continued to the podium. He inclined his head to the seated Keplar and leaned on the lectern a moment. Then he picked up the gavel and brought it down with a crash. The head flew across the room and rattled into a corner. He dropped the handle.

"This meeting will come to order! Sergeant-at-arms, you will eject Councilor Frey unless he sits down in the next ten seconds." Blackword regarded his watch.

The councilor sat and immediately shot up his hand. Blackword chuckled around his cigar.

"Okay, okay. I heard you the first time. No need repeating. Obviously your memory needs refreshing, Councilor. You say this council hired me for one reason —

to win the war against Macedon. Mmm? All right.

"One: there *is* no war against Macedon, and there wasn't when I was hired. Two: that's *not* the way my contract reads. I was employed to open trade with Macedon and patch up a share-and-share-alike policy with Macedon concerning the three unpopulated worlds of this system. That correct, Mr. Presidor?"

Keplar nodded without speaking.

"All right. And one thing else. This is for you personally, Councilor Frey, and to you personally, every man in this room. I demonstrated my faith when I threw in with you in the matter of Colonel Hines' murder. I remind you in passing, because you force me to, that we are all accessories after the fact in the deliberate hoodwinking of the authorities in that little matter."

Frey subsided. He disdained the many exchanged looks on all sides.

"Now then. There's a 'satellite' in our sky. It's a ship, a spherical ship, hovering directly over our capital. Thus it *isn't* a satellite. It's loaded with cobalt rockets. They're aimed at Troy. What's worse, they're aimed at Troy City — right here, gentlemen, at us. It's a Macedonian ship and we have an ultimatum — capitulate or go the way of all atoms.

"The ship broadcast that ulti-

matum and clammed up. It refuses to acknowledge contact. We are unable to contact Macedon because her moon is in the way, and the ultimatum runs out before the moon's out of the way. So they deliberately planned this to negate all but personal contact. I repeat: capitulate or else. Are these facts correct, Mr. Presidor?"

A. J. Keplar nodded unhappily.

"All right. We have one hour and — umm — seven minutes. Anyone here *not* want to capitulate?"

THERE was a considerable amount of noise in the council room. But when Blacksword banged his fist in lieu of the decapitated gavel and repeated the question, there was no answer.

"Sergeant-at-arms, our men are waiting at the transmitter. Please inform them that they may go ahead and read the prepared statement I have already given them."

Blacksword waved meatily at a dense cloud of smoke. "Now then. Their only demand is that *I*, personally and unaccompanied, go to Macedon to discuss terms. Is there any objection to that?"

"So long as you agree to nothing!" Frey cried.

"Gentlemen, you employed me because you wanted me. I'm an expert salesman. I guarantee you my wages against double that sum that I shall open trade with Macedon and arrive at an agreement con-

cerning the other three worlds of this system. I *guarantee* it against full forfeiture of my wages. Now. As of the moment I sign the papers with Macedon, I resign as Dictator of Troy. That's the contract. My job will be done. I want my money now."

The stormy Frey shouted again. "And what assurance have we that you'll carry out your duty, instead of vanishing with the money?"

"Why, sir, I'm shocked. But since the thought had previously occurred to me that that thought might occur to you, I have prepared an agreement which Presidor Keplar and I shall co-sign. That way you have me. TAI will take over if I abscond with your funds. There are a half-dozen charges: money under false pretenses, failure to fulfill governmental contract, so forth, so on."

A. J. Keplar read the mutually binding agreement aloud. He and Blacksword signed it, and Blacksword handed it to him. Councilor Frey demanded it be photocopied and filed at once. Blacksword agreed, with a rueful shake of his head. Keplar gave him his wages, a check for \$500,000. Blacksword pocketed it and winked as he shook Keplar's hand.

"Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure. You will agree with me in a few days when the Macedonian ambassadors arrive. Thank you, I have a ship waiting to take me to

Macedon. Oh, and Councilor Frey, it's my own ship."

Blacksword tarried on Troy only long enough to special-deliver the check to the Home Planet Bank and Trust Co. of Earth, for deposit only, to write himself a check on that bank to the amount of \$500,000, and to mail it to the First Planetary Bank of Luna, for deposit only.

Then he departed for Macedon.

Approximately one hour later, the ever-suspicious Councilor Frey discovered the very interesting fact that the agreement Blacksword had brought to the meeting had been prepared the day before the appearance of the Macedonian warship.

STEP NINE

THE ports of the *Ebon Cutlass* opened and disgorged two men. One was the pilot. The other, when the cigar smoke had cleared in the Macedonian air, proved to be G. Paul Blacksword, leaning lightly on a cane.

A very long, very black, very chrome-trimmed limousine growled up alongside Blacksword's allegorically named ship and the chauffeur leaped out and opened the rear door. Blacksword, after a couple of words to his pilot, entered the car.

"I want my ship kept clear and ready for takeoff," he said to the soldier-chauffeur.

"I'll see to it, Dictator."

"Fine. My pilot will remain with the ship. When I am ready to leave, I'll tolerate no folderol about delays."

"I'll see to it personally, Dictator."

"Thank you very much."

The young soldier tooled the big car across the port to the group of waiting men.

"Please start at the left and give me name, rank and serial number of those men," Blackword said as they approached the party. "I think I remember them, but I don't want to miscall any names."

"Yes, sir." Starting with General Dane and ending with twenty-three-year-old King Robert II, he identified the members of the Macedonian delegation.

The car drew up before the group and Blackword was out before the chauffeur could open his own door.

"King Robert!" Blackword cried jovially. "It's certainly a pleasure to see you again!"

The young monarch took Blackword's extended hand impersonally. "Dictator Blackword," he acknowledged, and turned to his deputation. "I'm sure you'll remember—"

Blackword was already shaking hands down the line, calling each man by name. They were obviously surprised and impressed with his "memory."

Reaching the end of the line, Blackword swung and peered up at the sky.

"It is still there, sir," General Dane told him quietly.

The spherical ship bearing the Trojan coat of arms hung almost directly above them.

"So I see, so I see. Well, gentlemen, we can certainly ease ourselves of that burden at once. King Robert, have I your word that there will be no last-ditch attempts, once that warship and its bombs are removed?"

"We have capitulated, sir. You have our word."

"Fine. Quite sufficient, of course. Where's the transmitter?"

"You cannot contact your world, Dictator. Our moon is in the way and contact will not be possible for nearly an hour."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. But it won't be necessary to contact Troy. The ship is under my command, as are all things Trojan."

They accompanied him, exchanging looks at his brusque affability, to the transmitting room.

BBLACKWORD beamed at the operator and usurped his chair. "Blackword to *Ebon Cutlass*. Blackword to *Ebon Cutlass*. Hey, there!"

A face appeared hazily on the screen.

"Battleship *Ebon Cutlass* to Blackword. Battleship *Ebon Cut-*

lass to Blacksword. Commander Gorham standing by for orders, sir."

The Macedonians did not understand Blacksword's chuckle. T. L. Gorham, formerly of Terra Alta Imperata, had visited Macedon only once. They recognized neither the name nor the static-distorted outline of his face on the viewscreen.

"Disarm cobalt rockets and pull away from Macedon at once, Commander. Proceed according to plan."

"I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to give the code word."

"Cry Wolf."

"Very well, Dictator." The misty face disappeared.

"Shall we watch, gentlemen?" Blacksword said pleasantly, and King Robert nodded with set lips. Outside, they stared up as the spherical craft jetted fire, shivered, started to move, and vanished in a soundless rush. Blacksword did not miss the Macedonian sighs.

They proceeded to the palace in two cars. Blacksword waved away suggestions that he rest, shower, eat, before they began their talks, and they trooped into the conference room.

"If I am not being too impertinent, Dictator, just where was your ship—" General Dane gestured at the sky — "based? Our scouts reported no warcraft leaving the surface of Troy."

"That must remain a military secret, at least until we are through here, General," Blacksword told him. "But it did arrive suddenly and hover directly over the capital at 7:30 this morning, did it not? And demand immediate surrender under pain of instant bombardment with cobalt rocket-bombs?"

"It did," King Robert said. "Since there would have been needless and inhumane slaying of civilians, we chose to—" he hesitated over the word—"surrender."

"That word is equally disagreeable to me, King Robert. Let's say 'parley' instead. There has been no war, and both our worlds want precisely the same things. It will be quite satisfactory to Troy to forget that the incident occurred. We can merely state 'the two governments decided to parley without the needless horrors of war' in our press releases."

The Macedonians registered surprise.

"In that event, I am happy we were unable to contact Troy this morning," General Dane said. "This is a gesture on your part, sir, which we cannot fail to appreciate."

"Fine. Now then. We want merely three things, gentlemen. As you know, I am fully authorized by the Secondary Control Council of Troy to present our terms, haggle if I have to, and sign the necessary papers. Shall we begin?" Blacksword glanced at his watch.

"As you will," King Robert II replied.

DRAWING on his cigar, Blacksword turned his head politely to Robert's left and exhaled. General Dane, seated on Robert's left, coughed surreptitiously.

"Well. First, we *demand* nothing. Not a damned thing. I mean that. Our expenditures have been slim and we have lost nothing but a bit of face. For that loss of face, or defamation of character, or whatever you choose to term your calling us—" Blacksword paused and frowned slightly as he quoted from memory — "heartless, blood-sucking aggressors dominated by a war-mongering council and a megalomaniac dictator" — for such cruel terms, we shall require restitution. The only way that can be made is through advertising. We are undertaking a galaxy-wide publicity campaign to clear ourselves."

Blacksword drew in and blew out a white cloud at the ceiling. Still regarding the ceiling, he said, "That was unkind of you, gentlemen. 'Heartless, blood-sucking aggressors dominated by a war-mongering council and a megalomaniac dictator!' I should like you to know that is untrue. I completely dominate Troy myself, and the council has merely carried my words to the people."

The young Macedonian minister of defense grinned and sobered

quickly, glancing about to ascertain if he'd been seen. Blacksword leered at him.

"As I was saying, the public relations campaign. We feel it only fair that Macedon should assist us in defraying the costs. And I reiterate that that is the *only* payment or recompense, of any kind, we — request."

"And the amount?" Robert II prompted suspiciously.

The chief speaker of Macedon's parliament leaned forward anxiously.

Blacksword shrugged. "We feel that half a million should cover it."

"Half a *million*?"

"Yes. Million, not billion."

"That sounds reasonable in the extreme, Majesty," the chief speaker observed.

"I should say!" the minister of defense exclaimed.

"Agreeable," King Robert said. "I admit, Dictator, we had expected far greater demands."

"I told you we demanded nothing. Mmm. I *do* have instructions to clear each point as we reach it, so please prepare the check now, if you will, and make it out to me. A token to take home, you understand."

Young Robert had appeared to bridle at Blacksword's pushing, but the final sentence satisfied him. "This government pays its debts in cash," he said with regal pride.

Blacksword nearly dropped his

cigar. "I suppose that will be acceptable," he said, with a desperate attempt at unconcerned calm.

The king nodded at the chief speaker, who sent his secretary arunning for the money.

Blacksword leaned back with a sigh. "Now. As to Monos, Deuteros and Tritos, the three unpeopled planets of this system."

THE Macedonians leaned forward. Robert II narrowed his eyes.

"We have drawn up an agreement concerning their exploitation," Blacksword said. He paused and peered at them over the tops of the papers he held. "Monos, which is fully equipped with oxygen atmosphere and the other requirements for human life, we wish to be colonized jointly and equally by Troy and Macedon, thus permanently uniting our two worlds, and forming, with the new world, an interplanetary triumvirate."

General Dane could not restrain himself. "Excellent!" he breathed.

"What will be the governmental system of the planet?" King Robert asked. "And what flag will she fly?"

Blacksword nodded. "First, we propose to call her Athena. Secondly, we have designed a new coat of arms and flag — here you are. It's a combination of the symbols of Troy and Macedon. Thirdly, we propose she be governed by a Trojan-Macedonian council for two

years. At the end of that time, she is to be allowed to choose her own system. That way we won't have the — 'Athenians' — rebelling."

"Done!" Robert snapped. He was obviously admiring the sketches of the Athenian flag and coat of arms. Blacksword had had them prepared secretly on Luna by a professional designer. This had been done twelve days after Blacksword's arrival on Troy, five months before.

"Fine. As for Deuteros and Tritos, we propose that a corporation be formed — Hellenistic Enterprises, Inc., perhaps — for exploitation of all natural resources of the worlds. The profits will be shared 50-50 by Troy and Macedon. We may want to sub-contract the actual work on a percentage basis to a private concern, but that can be settled later."

They gaped at him. Even the careful King Robert lost his composure.

"The board of directors, of course," Blacksword went on, glancing at his watch, "will be composed of an equal number of members of the Trojan Council and the Macedonian Parliament. I'd suggest you hire a businessman as president of the corporation."

Robert II had taken advantage of the opportunity to regain his outward coolness. "Dictator Blacksword, Macedon agrees," he said quietly.

"Good, good. Now here is a trade agreement we have drawn up for your approval." Blacksword handed him a sheet of paper.

The monarch read it, turned it over, looked at Blacksword.

Blacksword answered the unspoken question. "That's all."

Robert handed the page to the minister of defense. Eyebrows peaking, he passed it to General Dane.

"There shall be free trade among the worlds of Troy, Macedon and Athena, according to the laws set down by Earth High Command," he read.

They stared.

"That's all. I think we're all familiar with the TAI free-trade laws. And that, gentlemen, is the complete article of agreement."

They continued to stare.

KING Robert said at last, "But—"

"Is there some point which needs clarification or adjustment, Majesty?" Blacksword asked innocently.

"This — is — all?"

"Not by a long shot. There's a lot of work to be done. But this is all we need discuss now. The war did not occur, and our parley is finished. I am happy its results are so mutually satisfactory. These agreements and contracts, when filed with TAI, are binding for one hundred years. We will file them at once, of course. That way there

can be no more disagreement between Macedon and Troy — not without TAI intervention, which is very troublesome and expensive. And you and I, King Robert, will have the satisfaction of having created something which will endure after we are gone. Shall we sign?"

They signed.

They beamed the documents to TAI headquarters, where they were photocopied and recorded. The Trojan-Macedonian alliance was irrevocably sealed, at least for the next hundred years.

The Macedonians were disappointed to learn that Blacksword, five fresh one-hundred-thousand-dollar bills in his pocket, must leave at once. Blacksword was sure he detected tears in the eyes of King Robert as they clasped hands. They were standing on the edge of the spaceport when Blacksword glanced up and saw the ship.

It was Trojan and it bore the insignia of the Secondary Control Council and it was coming down very fast.

"Gentlemen, I must hurry," he snapped, and hurled his bulk, along with cane and cigar, into the limousine.

"Get me to my ship and burn the paving!" he ordered.

The car hurtled across the tarmac, leaving Macedonian officials scratching their heads.

As the car pulled up near the

Ebon Cutlass, a man ran out of the communications room and handed a message to General Dane. He glanced up at the down-sweeping ship, then at the departing Blacksword. He disappeared into the communications room.

Blacksword had both feet and his cane on the ground when the siren went off. Then the loud-speaker bawled in General Dane's voice: "*Stop that man! Stop Blacksword!*"

Blacksword's chauffeur was stupefied for four seconds before he reached for his pistol. Four seconds was approximately three too long. Blacksword, moving twice as fast as a man his size would be expected to move, cracked the fellow alongside the head with the steel-filled cane.

Blacksword dived into his ship with a last backward look — a kaleidoscope of down-hurtling Trojan ship, milling Macedonian dignitaries, running armed men, and a command car full of uniforms bearing down on the *Ebon Cutlass*.

"Gun it!" he yelled, and slammed the port.

The *Ebon Cutlass* roared off, leaving behind some very angry men of two different worlds with some very interesting things to say.

STEP TEN

COMMUNIQUE from Blacksword to Gorham:

Well done! Get our "Trojan warcraft" and our "Macedonian warcraft" and all those "cobalt bombs" back to base and remove the fake insignia. They both surrendered to each other without knowing it till too late! They are now hopelessly allied, with no possibility of war for at least a century.

A bonus has been deposited to your bank account, "Commander."

*Blacksword
Ex-Dictator
Troy*

T A I

TOP SECRET

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF ONLY

TO : G. L. Dienes

Commander-In-Chief
Terra Alta Imperata
Lisbon
Earth

Lee:

The business with Macedon and Troy went off very smoothly, and we even recruited a new man. Former TAI captain.

I note from recent news releases that both Troy and Macedon were so disgusted with the way their respective governments were hoodwinked by one Blacksword, a completely unscrupulous blackguard, they have fired the whole crew and become democracies, both of them. It is my understanding they also plan to inflict this form of government on the to-be-colonized world, Athena.

Three new democracies join the ranks.

Why in the name of heaven it is considered so damned important that every world eventually adopt Earth's governmental system, I'm sure I don't know. This observation following dealings with such men as your boss, President Kearney.

It does my heart good to know that men like you are around to protect men like him from the unscrupulous machinations of men like Blacksword.

But so be it, and my services remain available for proselytizing via showing them the fallacies of totalitarianism.

Since my salary is so ridiculously inadequate, and since the Trojan affair entailed such extensive expense as travel, recruiting, etc., please forward, in the usual way, expenses totaling \$500,000 post haste. No swindle sheet attached. Too busy to keep one.

G. Paul Blacksword
Top Secret Agent #1

DICTATOR desires employment, preferably permanent, in similar capacity. Will accept opportunity to establish own circumstances. Seven years, five months experience. Last position terminated at request of populace. Box 702 GBS Network.

— A. J. OFFUTT



SORRY, SOMEBODY LOST OUR HEAD

A publishing business poroble goes something like this: A publisher, irritated by there never hoving been a book free of errors from Gutenberg on down, hired 364 proofreaders to proofread the 364 pages of o book he was publishing. When the book hod been proofreed 364 times and finfolly come off the press, he held it proudly and said: "At lost, the perfect book!"

And then he noticed that the title on the cover was misspelled.

We don't cloim that the October issue of this mogazine could motch that exorbitont care, but we con indeed motch the cotostrophe on that cover. To all the letter-writers ond phoners who brought to our ottention the fact that "Science Fiction" ond "35¢" oppeered on the October cover, we con but exploin that we went bock to o plont that used to do our engroving, but which unfortunately still hod our old logotype. Result: chaos.

The price is surrinted on this issue, since two covers ore olways printed together, ond since publishing economics just won't allow a mogazine of this size to be monufactured ot anything like 35¢.

Finoncially, the error hurts bodily, but there is o possible plus: we can now find out if "Science Fiction" on the cover helps or hurts sales.

(Continued from page 7)

that we are unable to comment on, except to wonder why not sons as well, and fathers?

A marked copy of the Pittsburgh *Sun-Telegraph* points to a feature called "The Squirrel Cage" by Douglass Welch reporting that "The dour and insolent machine which dispenses hot canned foods in the building in which we work gave away all its baked beans (with pork) and all its frankfurters and sauerkraut the other day; and our fellow-employees were jubilant. The following morning the machine which stands beside it — a big yellow monster with a single red baleful eye — suddenly gave up all its hot coffee, like an excited puppy. This occasioned a roar of laughter from the shallow-thinking humans who saw it; but we didn't laugh. To us it seemed more sinister than funny. 'Oh, come, Welch,' we can already hear you saying, 'these are merely isolated instances. These are not significant.' All right. A machine working for the federal government in Chicago has been sending checks for \$24,785.06 to an elderly couple in Payallup, Wash. This couple is entitled to receive only \$147.80 a month in old-age and survivor's-insurance payments. The machine types out the right address but persists in misspelling the last name 'Evans' as 'Evcnx.' Evans has sent back three checks and a

protesting letter with each of them. And what happens? Another machine in Chicago receives the checks and reads the letters with a wide, knowing smile — and does nothing . . . So the bean machine gives away beans; the coffee machine gives away coffee; and the check-writing machine gives away money. Somewhere in the United States, disguised possibly as a simple gum-dispenser on a subway station platform, is the super-brain machine which is directing all this." In this column, copyright 1958 by King Features Syndicate Inc., and perhaps others we have not seen, Mr. Welch is a valued joiner of our outnumbered posse, for *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1955 edition, says George H. Scithers, Stanford, Cal., adds up 104,219 more wives than husbands in the U.S. (Widows and divorcees are tabulated separately.) And John Harper, Maple Shade, N. J., warns that everybody now alive will be gone, *as far as we know*, by 2075 at the latest — an unprecedented 2½ billion deaths — and urges us to reproduce to offset the slaughter.

We say no. Human cells are completely replaced every six years. One day all those discarded cells are going to get together and leave no room for cars, vanished or otherwise, aliens, machines, or surplus wives.

— H. L. GOLD

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